

# Poverty Stalks Latin America Nations

(The following article is by the editor of Our Times, official newspaper of the Diocese of Yakima, Wash., who has just returned from a four-week flying visit to Latin America as part of a team of U.S. Catholic journalists. Purpose of the 15,000-mile trip, which included stops at Lima, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Caracas, was to take part in press seminars with Latin American Catholic journalists.)

By RAYMOND RUPPERT  
(N.C.W.C. News Service)

Spring has returned to Latin America. It is a new season. But there is springtime in another sense, too, in that troubled continent. The seeds of discontent and unrest have been planted in the hearts of millions of poverty-stricken people.

One day — no one knows how soon — those seeds of unrest will send out tender shoots, perhaps to flourish and die, perhaps to wilt and die.

For the one inescapable conclusion about much of Latin America today is that a few people are extremely wealthy and that millions of people are starvation poor. This has created a climate for a winter of discontent that can only be followed by a springtime of unrest and, perhaps of violence.

The one thing I think I have learned is not to judge too quickly or too dogmatically what I read about Latin America. Thus what is set down here is one reporter's principal impressions about Latin America.

—A movement toward revolution has begun among the poverty-stricken lower classes. This is not a communist movement.

Nor is it, at the moment, a Catholic movement. The Reds are trying to capitalize on it. And a few bold churchmen have raised their voices with an appeal for social justice based on Catholic teachings.

—Religious faith is deeply imbedded in the hearts of the people. But without priests and without religious instruction, the people can slip away from their faith.

—Latin America has a class society. The very rich in the upper class are unconcerned with the destitution around them, except as they fear the unrest may endanger their fortunes. In the low class are the poor and ignorant but awakening millions. The middle class is also slowly emerging but is not yet a significant factor.

—A Latin American clergy must be developed, but the barriers are many and the needs for foreign priests and lay missionaries will continue for many years.

—Aid from the United States either by the government or by the Church, can be a decisive factor in saving the continent from revolution, but that aid must be offered and accepted under realistic terms.

There is one big question today in Latin America: How much time is left?

HOW MUCH time is left to correct without violence the great disparity between wealth and poverty, a breeding ground for social injustice and revolutionary unrest?

How much time is left to bring the Church to the millions who have the Faith "bred in the marrow of their bones" but who may lose that heritage if left much longer without priests and instruction?

How much time is left to develop an articulate and purposeful leadership among the middle class?

How much time is left to displace the ruling oligarchy with some form of government sympathetic to the needs and hopes of the rising masses?

Time may run out any day in any country. The result could be bloody revolution.

The position of the Church in Peru is a delicate one. One statistic to keep in mind is that Peru has only one priest for every 6,000 Catholics compared to one for 600 in the United States.

An estimated 100,000 people live in Lima's shantytowns, the slums rimming the city. In most shantytowns there is no water and the people must buy it; they pay a high price. The only work they can find in the city is as menials. Or they beg in the streets or they steal or they peddle gimcracks. Immorality, crime, illiteracy are constant companions in those shantytowns ruled "by the fist."

Father Vincent Mallon, a Maryknoll priest who serves in Lima, told us that the Catholic Faith of the people is the great bulwark against communism. He said that many poor people are attracted by the communist promise of material help but that they refuse to come into the Red camp because they understand that communism is opposed to their Faith.

The great need is for priests. But the barriers to developing the clergy are great. The obstacles include the poor educa-

tional formation of the mass of the people, parental objection — often because some priests have lived less than priestly lives — and the fact that many possible candidates are born out of wedlock and illegitimacy is an impediment to the priesthood.

Coupled with these obstacles is the further complication that a color problem does exist in Peru. The Indian who becomes a priest — and almost half of the people of Peru are Indians — finds that he is not accepted among the upper class.

A so-called "good" Catholic among the rich upper class is that Catholic who will do a favor for the Church when the need arises and who receives the sacraments. (Although not as often as that Brazilian politician we were told about who went to Communion three times on the same Sunday in three different churches; he was electioneering.)

Being this kind of "good" Catholic, however, does not involve having a social conscience or being dedicated to translating the social teachings of the Church into action in the world.

Flying across the continent from Lima to Sao Paulo, we found both that metropolis and the country in a state of depression that is both economic and spiritual. Brazil was hit hard by the sudden resignation of President Janio Quadros last August, and inflation is becoming worse every day.

The depression is also spiritual. According to Father Edmund N. Leising, vice provincial of the Oblates of Mary

Immaculate in Sao Paulo, 2,000 Catholics a day in Brazil are being lost to the Faith either through Protestant proselytizing or through falling away to spiritism. It is his estimate also that three per cent of the Catholics in Sao Paulo are what we would call practicing Catholics; that is, they attend Mass on Sunday.

Being a missionary priest is not an easy life. About 25 per cent of the foreign-born priests have to return home because they can no longer take the frustration and hardship.

Father Leising gave us some idea of how inflation has affected Brazil. He said that in 1949, the cruzeiro was valued at 17 to a U.S. dollar. When we reached Sao Paulo it was valued at 304 to the dollar, and two days later rose to 322 to the dollar.

WE FOUND Caracas also a city in economic depression. A priest who has made it his business to keep abreast of political movements estimated that there are, among Venezuela's seven million people, about 50,000 hard-core communists. Of these, he said, about a thousand "know what it's all about."

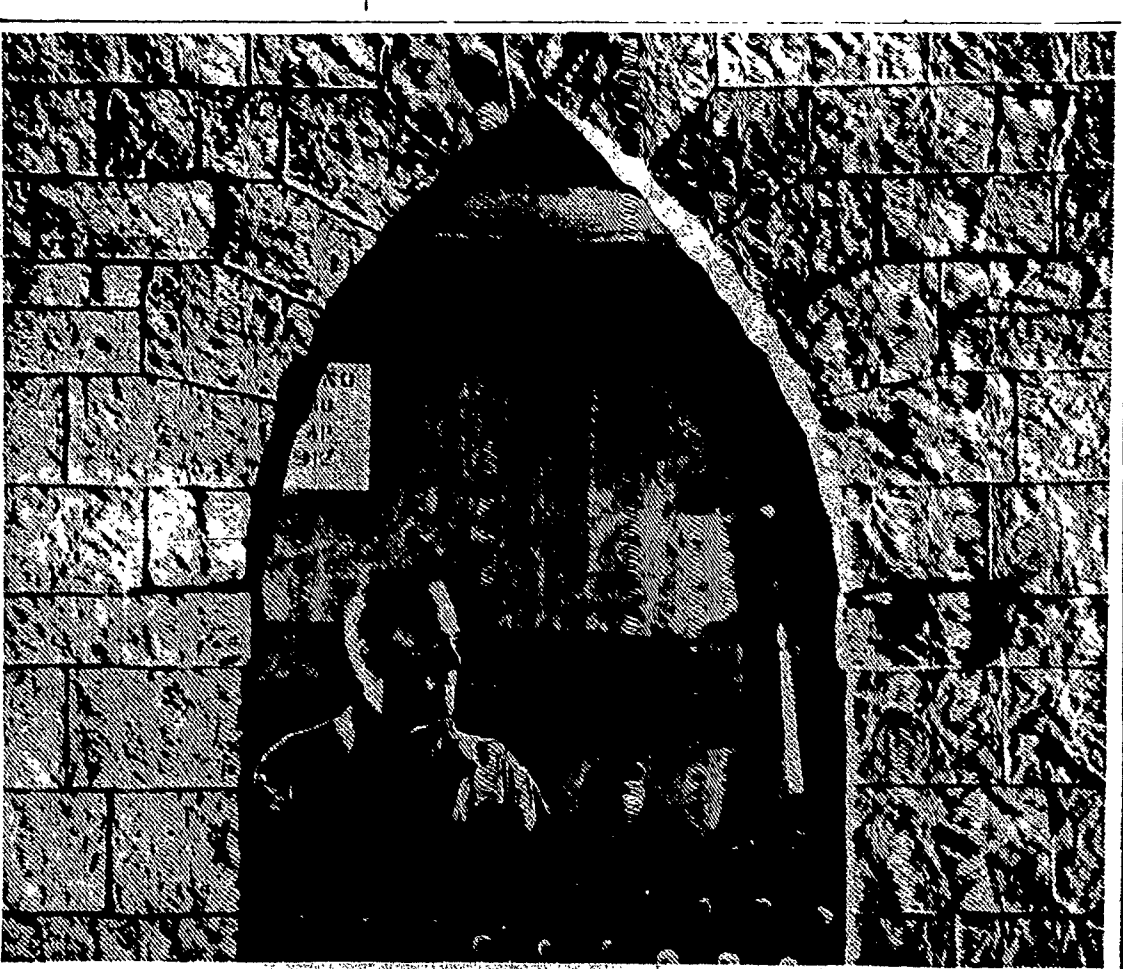
Contrariwise, he estimated that of the 1,500 priests in that country, "probably a good 100 are social-minded." It was his view that Catholic masses are slowly drifting away from the Faith but that a Catholic elite is being formed.

The North American who tries to understand his Latin neighbors must realize that he carries with him as he travels south three ideas that are not easily found in Latin America.



**CYO Good Samaritans**

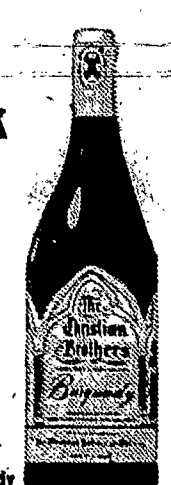
Bloomfield — (RNS) — Louise Nacca, 15, a cerebral palsy victim, gets lessons in how to creep — which may lead to further progress in speaking and better coordination — from three teen-aged volunteers from the Catholic Youth Organization of St. Thomas the Apostle parish, Bloomfield, N.J. Louise now has 74 friends who visit her daily in groups of four and five to put her through a pattern suggested by Philadelphia doctors. It is thought that the brain area by which creeping is controlled may also affect other activities, such as speech and coordination.



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hazard in trying to help Latin America. For fear of outcries at home, our government may be wary of giving aid to strengthen the Church in Latin America. But only with a strong Church able to espouse the principles of social justice can the people of Latin America find economic freedom and political independence.

There are these dangers: —That we will expect too much of Latin Americans in the way of democratic action; they are not ready. —That we will not make clear to them the differences between the exploiter "robber

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