

Renewed Hope for Church in Latin America

By FR. VINCENT MAELON, M.M. NC News Service

Caracas, Venezuela — The published statements of the Latin American bishops on the close of their second general assembly in Medellin, Colombia, have given birth to a renewed hope for the Church in this part of the world.

When the divided 130 bishops and 100 advisers began their deliberations on Aug. 26 in the monastic tranquility of the unfinished major seminary of Medellin, few observers were optimistic that much positive good would come out of the meeting.

But these Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking bishops sprung the unexpected and closed ranks to produce a remarkable document whose principles will guide the Church in Latin America for many years to come.

The full text of the final conclusions will not be made known until it is approved by the Holy See, but the bishops' "message" at the close of their meeting and certain released excerpts from the conclusions themselves can provide an accurate insight into the spirit of the final document.

Undoubtedly, the presence and the balanced discourses of Pope Paul VI at the opening of the assembly in the Bogota cathedral helped to settle the bishops down. The only point in the Pope's speech to which some of the liberals took exception was that concerning the use of violence to effect change.

Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil felt that too much emphasis had been placed on condemning some possible future violence of the poor against the rich, and scarcely any on the present violence of hunger, sickness and misery in general being inflicted on the poor as a result of the attitude of the rich.

Using Pope Paul's encyclical, the Development of People, as a base, the bishops' assembly decided both kinds of violence, and acknowledged that force can be used as a last resort against prolonged, insupportable and extreme tyranny, a doctrine that is at least as old as St. Thomas Aquinas. Both sides in the controversy appeared to be pleased with this solution.

The Latin American Bishops' Council (CELAM) is an organization that, up until now, has been looked upon with some suspicion by the more conservative of the Latin American bishops and to some degree by the Holy See.

Many Latin American bishops resisted CELAM in the beginning. In the first place, their own national hierarchies were poorly, if at all, organized, and the bishops felt that they should try to get something organized on a national level before considering an international organization.

Second, some bishops felt that CELAM was an imposition of the Holy See, and in the beginning they had some reason to believe it. The Vatican felt some trepidation at the collective strength of such a large number of bishops representing more than a third of the world's Catholics, and insisted on maintaining strict control.

By the end of the Second Vatican Council the organization began to move. The reasons were the dynamic leadership of its new president, Bishop Humberto Larraín Errazuriz of Talca, Chile, later killed in a car crash, and the appearance of young, enthusiastic, competent priests from Belgium, France, the Netherlands and the U.S., as well as from Latin America itself.

who worked dedicatedly with Bishop Larraín to inject life into CELAM.

This was both good and bad. It was good in the sense that it got CELAM moving, but it was bad in the sense that it attracted the hostile attention of conservative Latin American bishops, who looked with suspicion at the youthful reformers working behind the scenes of the Latin American Bishops' Council.

The real problem was how to go about selecting the matter to be discussed and how

to face up to the problems in Latin America without incurring fatal opposition from bishops who would favor little more than holding to the status quo.

A document was prepared in January 1968 and sent to the Holy See and the various Latin American national hierarchies for amendment and revision. A second draft was then made and subsequently published in June. Then the furor began.

In vain did the leaders ex-

plain that the document was only a "working document," to be studied and revised by the full membership of the second general assembly.

Churchmen in the more prosperous countries complained that the document exaggerated the "misery" in Latin America. Groups of starchy-eyed reformers on the left denounced the document as being too reactionary and called for more radical reforms.

As Pope Paul began pre-

parations for his flight to Bogota for the International Eucharistic Congress, groups of bishops in Colombia and Argentina prepared rival documents favoring the conservative wing, while priests in various countries protested the Pope's visit to Colombia, a country whose structures, they claimed, typify the causes of social injustice in Latin America.

Consequently, when the bishops' assembly opened in

Medellin in August no one knew what was going to happen. Would the meeting blow up? Who would control it? Would the Holy See seek to dominate it? Could the bishops get together?

First observations at the two-week meeting closed were that there was no "winning side." Extremists on both sides definitely lost. Everyone was agreed that there was need for change and the principles laid down by the bishops call for big changes.

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