

**Catholics to Meet in Puebla, Mexico;
Protestants, Next Week in Oaxtepec**

Latin Churches Strive for Justice

By FRANK MAUROVICH
Religious News Service Analyst

World religious attention has shifted to Mexico where two important international meetings will chart the course for the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in Latin America for years to come.



The third Conference of Latin American Catholic Bishops (CELAM) will meet for two weeks in Puebla, Mexico, starting Oct. 12. The theme of the conference is "Evangelization in the Present and Future in Latin America."

A month earlier, Sept. 19-26, more than 300 delegates from 20 South American and Caribbean countries will gather in Oaxtepec for the Assembly of Latin American Protestant Churches to seek "greater unity of the Christian community."

Though called to challenge the Christian Churches to the critical task of evangelization in a continent beset by growing poverty and political oppression, both meetings have significant implications for worldwide Christianity.

"Within a few years, we will have here in Latin America more than half the Christians in the entire world," says Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider of Brazil. "So we have a special mission for the creation of a new society within the Christian context."

The agendas for the two meetings are much broader than the announced themes of evangelization and unity indicate, and they dovetail in certain critical areas, described in the Protestant pre-meeting working paper as "areas which demand priority action."

They include such problems as hunger, social justice and the situation of women, civic participation in community life, and ramifications of the political doctrine of "national security" which military regimes use to justify suppression of human rights.

"Obviously, there is a connection between Puebla and Oaxtepec, but it is neither intentional nor planned," says Methodist Bishop Federico Pagura of Argentina. "The plan of God, we hope, is for a deep and true connection. The scandal of our divisions weakens the task of evangelization," he explains.

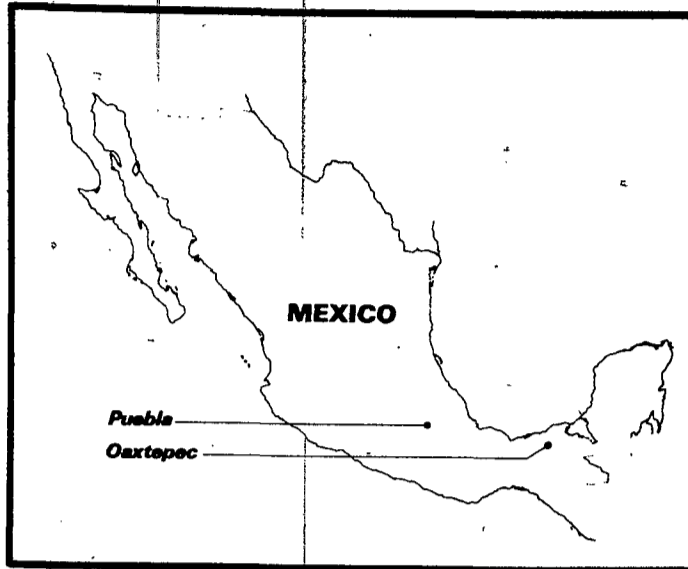
Inspired both by Vatican Council teachings and the pronouncements of the CELAM II meeting in Medellin 10 years ago, the Catholic Church has taken a leadership role in defending human rights and promoting social awareness and organization among campesino and worker groups.

But critics both within and outside the Church have accused religious leaders of being carried away with the "theology of liberation" and of becoming too heavily involved in politics.

"There has been a lot of confusion about theology of liberation," says Cardinal Luis Aponte Martinez of Puerto Rico, explaining that it has been used to endorse Marxism and various Christians for Socialism groups throughout Latin America.

Archbishop Helder Camara, Brazil's champion of social justice agrees that there is confusion about theology of liberation, but he puts it another way. "Evidently, the governments and the privileged groups of our continent are not happy with the Catholic Church's decision to walk in the line of a liberating Gospel. My surprise is not with their reaction, but the reasoning behind it."

"They are not against Christ or Christianity or the Church — no, absolutely not — they are proclaiming themselves the conservators of the Christian civilization. They are against infiltration of communism in the Church. But when we are trying to support poor and oppressed persons, we are labeled subversive persons, Communists," Archbishop Camara explains.



While some observers have expressed concern that the bishops will pull back from the commitment made at Medellin to struggle on the side of the poor, the majority of bishops deny the possibility of retreat.

In fact, Cardinal Lorscheider, the president of CELAM, predicts that the results of Puebla will be more profound than Medellin. "This time there is much more preparation, much more consideration, and not only on the part of the bishops but also of the entire people of God. Because of this, I believe that Puebla will be taken much more seriously," Cardinal Lorscheider says.

The importance of the Protestant meeting, from the organizers' point of view, is seen in the potential testimony of a united Protestant voice. In spite of the Protestant Churches' identity as a religious minority in Latin America (some 10 per cent of the 310 million population), they have a significant popular influence that would be strengthened by a united voice.

Unlike the Puebla meeting, however, where the some 175 Catholic bishops (elected delegations from each country) begin with considerable homogeneity, the primary obstacle facing the Oaxtepec assembly is the wide range of structural and theological diversity in the 85 participating national Churches.

The spectrum runs across the board, from liberal Protestants, to evangelicals, to fundamentalists. Organizers note, however, that for the first time, a significant number of Pentacostal Churches will be participating at such a continental meeting.

"The very fact that all will come together to discuss a common agenda is a very positive sign," says Dr. Benjamin Santana, a Puerto Rican Methodist leader who is president of the Assembly's organizing committee.

A proposal to create a continental Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias Evangelicas (Latin American Council of Churches) is expected to create considerable controversy at the Protestant assembly.

The proposal is given little hope of survival because both conservatives and progressives have the same objection — that one or the other faction will dominate to promote or block ecumenical involvement in the liberation struggle of the poor.

The shadow of the deteriorating economic and social conditions in Latin America hangs over both Puebla and Oaxtepec as the Protestant and Catholic religious leaders try to illumine the Churches' role amid such darkness.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger often pointed out that in the last 10 years, per capita income in Latin America increased by \$100. But the poorest 20 per cent of the population gained only \$2. In addition, according to the Organization of American States statistics, some 207 million people in the six most industrially advanced countries earn less than \$75 per year.

The future looks even grimmer. By the year 200,

OAS estimates, the population of Latin America will double to more than 600 million. And most of the people will be concentrated in the slums that already surround the region's urban centers. Mexico City, according to a recent working paper circulated by the World Bank, will have become the largest city in the world with a projected population of 32 million.

Coupled with the extreme poverty is the violent repression not only against armed revolutionaries but against all advocates of social change, including clergymen and Christian lay leaders.

Ten years ago, North Americans feared that all of Latin America was on the road to Cuban-type revolution and Communist totalitarianism. Totalitarianism has happened, but from the right, not the left. Today, right-wing military governments control all of South America with the exception of Venezuela and Colombia and the tiny republics of Surinam and Guyana. In Central America, there are more elections, but only Costa Rica is a real democracy.

Confronted by such conditions, the Latin American Catholic bishops declared at Medellin in 1968: "Faced with the need of a total change of Latin American structures, we believe that change has a political reform as its prerequisite." They pledged to help construct "a new society."

Thus, says Methodist Bishop Federico Pagura, "We look to Puebla and Oaxtepec to make a deep commitment with Christ in the service of the disinherited, the poor and needy of our Latin America."

And, as political scientist Claude Pomerleau, CSC, of the University of Notre Dame says: "In the long run, the Latin American church will probably be the first church to be transformed by its own message of human dignity and radical equality. Such a church might not automatically avoid the trap of partisan politics, but it would certainly influence the rest of us as we try to integrate religious values into a world searching for meaning and vision."

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