

Puebla Will Advance Medellin's Work

By ARCHBISHOP HELDER CAMARA
(as told to Dow Kirkpatrick, RNS correspondent)

Recife, Brazil — In order to understand the implications of the forthcoming meeting of the Latin American Bishops in Puebla, Mexico, it is essential to know what happened at CELAM II in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968.



Special

In the past, in our Latin American continent, with the best intentions, we men of the Church were so concerned to have the support of the authorities of the social order that we were very close to the governments and the rich. Our intention was to receive favors to make it possible for us to help the poor.

We did not realize the menace in this. We were presenting a certain participation in the injustices that were and always are in our situation. In this time, always with the best intentions, we were presenting to our people a very passive Christianity.

We must be patient, we told them, with the sufferings of this life compared to the joys of the everlasting life. And they believed obedience, patience, acceptance of the sufferings, were, are and always will be great virtues. But in this context we were supporting the oppressors. This explains our change of behavior today.

This situation not only exists in our continent, but in the whole world. Because of it, the United Nations is proclaiming the necessity of a new international economic order. Because, their statistics indicate, more than two thirds of the people of the world live in subhuman conditions.

The letters of the popes, above all from Leo XIII and Paul VI, more and more are demanding justice as the condition for peace. Following Vatican II, we were called to Medellin by Pope Paul himself who was present to open the meeting. All bishops present were elected by our own conferences or selected by the Holy Father. All conclusions of Medellin were approved by Rome. It was a very official meeting.

At Medellin we assumed a different position. For example, we were proclaiming that the injustices are not only occasional. We raised questions of structures of injustice. We proclaimed that in our Christian continent, we have a terrible colonialism, an internal colonialism in which the wealthy were crushing their own countrymen.

And we proclaimed also our decision to walk in the line of a liberating Gospel. Evidently the governments and privileged groups of our continent are not happy with the change of our behavior. I understand very

well their reaction. My surprise is not from the reaction, but from the reasoning behind it.

Next month prelates from all over Latin America will gather in Puebla, Mexico at the second plenary conference of their organization, CELAM. It has been rumored that Pope John Paul II may also attend.

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 the infiltration of communism in the Church.

When we are trying to support the poor and oppressed person, immediately we are labeled subversive persons, Communists.

An example: in this moment, there exists in different countries, and in my own country, concern for the great modernization of agriculture. Large companies, international companies, are coming and there exists immediately a natural alliance between them and the privileged groups of our countries. They are buying land in the rural areas. In these areas for many, many years great numbers of families have lived.

In those early years of settlement, our forefathers were not using official documents. The lands were our lands. When the great companies arrive with official documents, these families are expelled. When the Church tries to support these poor families, immediately we are called subversives, communists.

The expelled families are moving to the cities. But our cities are growing; they are exploding. For instance, Sao Paulo is growing faster and faster to 10 million; Recife to 2.5 million.

When these families arrive in the cities it is with new hope. They have the impression that in the cities they will have well-paid work, schools for their children, hospitals and housing. Again, when the Church tries to support the poor families in the cities, we are called subversives.

This is only one illustration.

Now comes Puebla, the meeting 10 years after Medellin. I am hopeful that with the grace of God our Father, with the prayers of our laymen, religious sisters, our priests — and with the support of our brother Christians of different denomination — and also of the Catholics of the United States and the world, we will have at Puebla not only affirmations of the Medellin conclusions, of the same priorities, but an intention to apply the Medellin principles.

We need today among all Christians of all denominations more than statements.

We pastors are not pastors of souls, but pastors of people who have souls and bodies. In this moment, when the world presents more than two-thirds of mankind in situations of injustice and oppression, for



DOM HELDER

me the great charity in our day is to help justice become real. Perhaps the great poverty of the Church is to accept the sacrifices and suffering which come from the love of justice.

Today, with the help of the God of our Fathers, the bishops in general are not walking alone. The first concern of a bishop is to walk with his priests, religious sisters and laity. It is one of the important lessons that our evangelical brothers have taught the Catholics — the layman leads.

The People of God are demanding that the Church in our continent should be the presence of Christ. We are really searching for our responsibility. In 20 years we will be crossing the anniversary of 2,000 years of the presence of Christ among men. How do we understand our responsibility when we see more than two-thirds of mankind in situations of injustice?

We need to have the courage to recognize that many countries are by name and origin Christian. The poor of the Third World are numerous in these Christian countries. Today it is impossible to believe God exists except to hear the cry of his suffering people. We need to be present. It is our duty as men and above all as Christians.

So, I am hopeful about Puebla because I know the mentality of Medellin. But above all, however, I am confident because I hope the prayers of so many people, especially so many poor people will accompany the presence of the Holy Spirit in Puebla.

More Opinions

CDA Action Opposed

Editor:

In regard to the article dealing with the national board of the Catholic Daughters of America opposing ordination of Women and ERA (12/6/78): I wonder how many of their 180,000 membership agree with the national board.

As a former member and office holder (I belonged to the Albion, N.Y., chapter and resigned with regret after marrying and moving out of the area), I cannot believe these beautiful Christian women who give so much

of themselves to serve others and God could believe they are less than their counterpart, the K of C, or that the nun who is a principal is any less than the parish priest, or that Jesus chose 12 men to be his apostles because women are below men.

There may be laws and social stigmata that give men more privileges, but no one, including CDA, can convince me that Jesus and our Father think man is better than woman.

Maybe if nuns and laity were given more "room" there wouldn't be a spiritually sick world.

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