

Pope's CELAM Trip Sparks Wide Interest

By FRANK MAUROVICH
(RNS Staff Writer)

Pope John Paul II's announcement that he will attend the Third Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) has redoubled already existing ecumenical interest in what is regarded as a crucial meeting of the Latin American hierarchy.



The pope will open the CELAM meeting with a Mass in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City on Jan. 27, after which the scene will shift to the town of Puebla de Los Angeles where some 350 participants will meet for 16 days of deliberation on "Evangelism Now and in the Future in Latin America."

The pope's visit will be more than ceremonial. Describing South America as a "continent of hope" and noting that nearly half of the world's 740 million Catholics live in Latin America, the pontiff said he was motivated to go because of the "great expectations aimed at (by the CELAM assembly)."

Other Christian share those expectations. Earlier, the newly formed Latin American Council of Protestant Churches in one of its first actions sent a letter to the Catholic bishops, stating that the Council prayerfully anticipated that the results of the Puebla meeting would be "a blessing for the whole continent."

In a region until recently better known for interreligious acrimony than for ecumenical solidarity, the Protestant leaders said, "We have been encouraged by the testimony rendered to Jesus Christ in difficult circumstances by many of our brethren of the Catholic Church." They urged the bishops to continue promoting "defense of life, ministry to the oppressed and the struggle for justice."

In the United States, 61 prominent Protestant and Catholic theologians and church representatives, including Methodist theologian Albert Outler and Catholic historian John Tracy Ellis, signed an open letter to their "brothers and sisters of Latin America," expressing "our enthusiasm for this (CELAM) meeting and our realization of how crucial it will be in the growth of the Latin American Church and our own." In addition, many leading Protestant publications, such as Christian Century and Christianity and Crisis, have joined Catholic publications in this country in focusing attention on the Puebla conference as a decisive moment for the Latin American Church.

Some of the drama to take place at Puebla was expressed by Dr. J. Harry Haines, the newly elected chairman of Church World Service, the relief and development agency of the National Council of Churches. Dr. Haines, a Methodist minister who recently returned from a fact-finding tour of South America, said, "If there is going to be any stand against the military dictatorships of Latin America, it will have to come from the Roman Catholic Church."

In an interview with Religious News Service, Archbishop Helder Camara, Brazil's renowned defender of the poor and oppressed, maintained that in order to understand the implications of the upcoming CELAM meeting, it is essential to understand what happened at CELAM II in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. (CELAM I, the organizational meeting which created the 22-country bishops' body to promote intercontinental communication and idea exchange, took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1955.)

Noting that Pope Paul VI, the first pontiff to visit South America, opened the Medellin assembly, Archbishop Camara explained how the Latin American Church transformed itself from accommodation with the powerful to proclamation for the poor. "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," the outspoken prelate said.

The archbishop stressed that the 16 documents of Medellin were not innovations of what has been called "liberation theology." Rather they were woven out of papal encyclicals that stretched from Pope Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum in 1891 to Paul VI's Populorum Progressio in 1967. But the warp and woof of Medellin, according to Dom Helder, was the Second Vatican Council's document "The Church in the Modern World," signed by the world's 2,300 Catholic bishops and promulgated by Pope Paul in 1965.

"We proclaimed our decision to walk in a liberating Gospel. Evidently, the governments and privileged



Pope John Paul II is shown here addressing an audience of Cardinals Dec. 22. During the address he announced his plans to attend the opening of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM).

groups of our continent are not happy with the change of our behavior," the Brazilian prelate told RNS.

According to Father Walter Buhlman, a former Franciscan missionary who now teaches theology at Gregorian University in Rome, Medellin unleashed a 10-year period of theological reflection and pastoral reorganization that has vibrated beyond Latin America.

Writing in his book, *The Coming of the Third Church* (Orbis), Dr. Buhlman says, "The formation of basic groups (comunidades de base) became the watchword. These it was hoped, would gradually arouse the mass of people to religious and social action."

These basic Christian communities — which now exist by the thousands, many of them with lay leadership — have borne fruit. "The Church in Latin America," the Franciscan theologian says, "no longer consists only of sumptuously adorned cathedrals and places of pilgrimage visited by the masses. It consists also of committed young Christians who make a decisive contribution to progress, of peasants who preach the Gospel, of family men who sacrifice their free time for the community."

"The experiments and pastoral experience of Latin America are more significant than the theology of liberation and can, with better reason, be taken as the contribution offered by the continent to the universal Church," Dr. Buhlman says. Pope John Paul apparently agrees. In announcing his trip, he indicated accord with those who say "the future of the Church is being played in Latin America."

Nonetheless, critics both within and outside the Latin American Church have accused religious leaders of being carried away with liberation theology and of becoming too heavily involved in politics. Some bishops, such as Cardinal Eugenio De Araujo Sales of Rio De Janeiro, insist that the Medellin documents have been misinterpreted to endorse Marxism and

various Christians for Socialism groups throughout Latin America. Interviewed on Vatican Radio, Cardinal Sales said that Puebla would concentrate on correcting such confusion of ideology with theology.

The tension at Puebla, however, will be more subtle, because the vast majority of bishops — both conservatives and progressives — agree that the Church must avoid the trap of partisan politics. The real drama at the CELAM meeting will be whether the bishops will recommit the Church to struggle on the side of the poor and oppressed — itself a political comment — or opt instead for a less conflictive course by emphasizing the Church's role of calling people, rich and poor, to unity.

Progressive churchmen have noted the heavy conservative bent of the working document for the Puebla meeting, prepared under the supervision of Archbishop Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, the secretary general of CELAM. "The preparatory document skirts around all conflictive aspects of social reality," complains Peruvian theologian Father Gustavo Gutierrez.

In 1976, a relatively unknown Polish prelate left little doubt where he stood on this controversial issue. Preaching a Lenten retreat to the Vatican household at the invitation of Pope Paul VI, the Polish cardinal said, "In the men of today there is certainly a form of contradiction which can be illustrated with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus."

"Jesus is on the side of Lazarus," he declared.

"Who is Jesus Christ for whole continents, traditions, cultures, political situations?" the cardinal asked. "He is a sign of liberation from unjust economic social systems in Latin America. . . . He is — and certainly should be — a reproach for affluent consumer societies."

The preacher was Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Cracow.

Area Woman to Attend CELAM III

While some 350 participants prepare for the Third Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) a small group of women called "Women for Dialogue" have completed plans to set up a lobbying effort in Puebla, Mexico.

Women for Dialogue, according to Ada Marie Isasi-Diaz, will attempt to raise the consciousness of the bishops and other participants on

issues dealing with women in the Church.

The ultimate goal of this effort will be for the bishops' final statement from CELAM to include "some acknowledgement that women are denied full participation" in Church matters, Isasi-Diaz said. She said that the preparatory document on the CELAM conference does not include the roles of women in the Church and

Women for Dialogue feels that it should.

Isasi-Diaz will be one of the 20-25 women "from many different walks of life" who will participate in the effort. She will represent the Women's Ordination Conference.

The lobby group will "give presentations on women in the Church, generate small group discussions and person to person dialogue" with

representatives to CELAM, Isasi-Diaz said.

Women for Dialogue will gather at Puebla de Los Angeles on Jan. 24, three days before Pope John Paul II opens CELAM with a concelebrated Mass.

The CELAM conference, originally scheduled to last 16 days will end one day later according to a statement made last week. The dates for the conference are now Jan. 27-Feb. 13.