

LATIN AMERICA AFTER SANTO DOMINGO
September 9, 1993

The diocese to which I have been appointed as bishop is comprised by an area of 47,000 square miles spreading across the border area where the United States and Mexico come together, and where northern North America meets Latin America.

"**Border**" in Spanish translates to frontera, which, for the English ear, immediately conveys the concept of "frontier." Frontier areas in any part of the world are those faraway places, far from the centers of official powers and official culture. Frontiers, in other words, lie at the hinterlands of the mainstream. While rapid means of communication and travel have lessened the feeling of isolation in the frontier, geographical positioning still allows us to look at things somewhat differently.

In our particular frontier we often look to the south of us, and this gives us a unique Latin American look at ourselves both as border people and North Americans.

Latin America, and most frequently, Mexico, is very often in our daily thoughts, dreams, frustrations and concerns. I lived, studied and worked in Latin America for several years, and I have often felt that we in the northern part of the hemisphere simply do not give Latin America the attention it deserves. Nor do we fully appreciate the fact that a greater knowledge and appreciation of our neighbors to the south would be to our advantage as well as to theirs.

1992 remembered the five hundredth anniversary of the violent clash between Europe and the New World and provoked healthy and much needed research, dialogue and re-reading of the relations between Europe and North America on one side, and Latin America on the other. Surely more research and further debate will continue in the forthcoming years as we remember other quincentenaries. I foresee that there will be academic convocations to commemorate the 500th anniversaries of the arrival of the first groups of missionaries, of Bartolomé de las Casas, of the first universities established in the New World, the arrival and reassessment of the early work in the

Americas of religious orders such as that of the Dominicans, Franciscans and Augustinians. These are indeed things to be hoped for.

But we need to give attention to **present** concerns. One of these concerns is that we might lose touch with our Latin American neighbors as the Cold War ends and anti-Communism becomes less of an excuse for North America to be involved in Latin American affairs. Precisely because the threat of Communism is not what it was in the past, the opportunity now is to recognize Latin America purely for its own merits, and not for the threat that ideologies promoted there might be for us in the North.

Also, if it happens that democracy holds--and it is now more wide-spread in Latin America than ever before--we might be lulled to think that Latin America is now a settled question. It is to be hoped that North America will strengthen and not lessen its interest in things that are happening to the south of us as we in Canada and the United States seek new alignments and new issues that affect our hemispheric mutual relations.

One of the aims of CEHILA-USA is to keep the issues of concern for both Latin and North America alive. Our work is an attempt to help us in North America to learn from the dramatic past of Latin America and how the Church has related to that drama. Among the more recent concerns that affect us mutually in the north and the south, I would like to focus on are those of the economy, the environment, the drug traffic, the Latinization of North America, ecumenism and the challenge of small communities.

The Economy

Latin America captivated our attention during its great conflicts in the 1970's and 1980's. Those were the years of the so-called "national security" policies. These were marked by violent revolutions, dictatorships, military oppression, the disappearance of thousands of people and the dislocation of many others who had to leave their native lands as refugees.

The 1980's are recognized as the "lost" decade where no economic growth occurred in Latin America and when there was constant pressure to pay foreign debts. Instead of moving forward economically, Latin America regressed to where it had been a few decades ago. Presently it is still too early to say whether the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) will be of benefit to the ordinary folks in both the northern and southern parts of our hemisphere.

For the ordinary folks of Latin America, the foreign debt continues to be the source of their state of poverty. The people constantly ask themselves, "Who borrowed the money? For what was it spent?" and "How has it benefited our countries?" It is definitely time to renegotiate, reduce and perhaps even eliminate some of those foreign debts that hurt our Latin American neighbors and in the long run, hurt even ourselves in North America.

The Environment

The environment is a concern that all of us in the Americas share. The rain forests of Latin America are of crucial importance to the entire world, and we need to work together in order to preserve the precious and life-giving forested lands.

In November, 1991, the Bishops of the United States issued a pastoral statement on the environment entitled, "Renewing the Earth."¹ In this statement we said that at the core of the environmental crisis is a moral challenge. This challenge calls us to examine how we use and

¹"Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching" Pastoral Letter by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 14, 1991.

share the goods of the earth, what we pass on to future generations, and how we live in harmony with God's creation.

We the peoples of the Americas are witnesses to the environmental degradation that surrounds us: the smog in our cities, chemicals in our water and on our food, eroded top soil, radioactive and toxic waste lacking adequate disposal sites and the threats to the health of industrial and farm workers. Poisoned water is an issue in both North and South America and we all suffer as acid rain pours on all our countries. Greenhouse gases and chloroflourocarbons affect our entire earth and will continue to affect us for generations to come.

In our statement we call upon all people of good will to consider how to frame a common and workable environmental ethic. We are especially concerned about the poor and the powerless who most directly bear the burden of current environmental carelessness. "Nature will truly enjoy its second spring, only when humanity has compassion for its own weakest members."

We need to understand that what happens in one part of our hemisphere, will affect the rest, and for the sake of the survival of all of us in the Americas, the issue of the environment is a most compelling challenge.

Drug Trafficking

The demand and supply of drugs has to be another of these major concerns that we all share in the Americas. The people of Latin America who supply the addictions of the north continually remind us that they would not produce nor sell harmful drugs if there were no demand. Perhaps the root cause of addictions is related to our materialistic and consumer-minded society. People seem to be frustrated and unhappy with who they are and what they have. What consumerism tells them they are supposed to be, they are not. Neither do they have the things that are supposed to make them happy. If this is true, then the drug problem will not be resolved until we change our value system radically. And how this massive metanoia will happen is beyond me, but just because a problem is so immense does not mean that we do not do our best to analyze the root causes of this problem and strategize how our moral educational processes can help us defeat the plague of drugs that affect so many of our people.

Latinization of North America

More a blessing than a concern is the gradual Latinization of North America with the influx of more and more immigrants from the south. Both Canada and the United States appreciate immigration, and both our countries are proud that we are nations of immigrants and that it is immigrants who have lent their spirit of adventure, skills, enthusiasm, and understandable ambition all of which have contributed to the building of our respective countries. The Latinization of which I speak is no doubt happening more in the United States than in Canada, but the phenomenon is real. Already Spanish is the second language of the United States. In California, for example, the minorities--and the Hispanics are the greatest number of these--already make up over 50 percent of the school population. In our own frontier region, our schools simply cannot keep up with the growing numbers of students coming from the south. Nonetheless, these new immigrants bring with them the values that we seem to be losing in the

north. Family, faith, respect, a strong aesthetic appreciation, and a century-old continuity of culture--all of these things cannot but enhance the quality of North American civilization.

Efforts need to be made to create bridges of understanding and mutual appreciation between the Latinos of the North and those of the South. The Latin American heritage is such a rich one; it would be a cultural tragedy if those of us who belong to it were to lose touch with it. Likewise, Latin Americans need to recognize that their cultural brothers and sisters in the North have taken with them some of the best of Latin American traditions and values. We need to develop genuine pride towards one another.

Ecumenism

New ecumenical questions have arisen in Latin America. I often think that the effects of reformation are only now being felt in the Spanish-speaking world. It was bound to happen. Last year at an ecumenical gathering², I pointed out that ecumenism for Hispanic Christians is a formidable challenge. I have heard Latin American thinkers express a fear that Latin America may be heading towards the religious wars experienced in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries. There have already been small skirmishes between Catholic and Protestant sectarian groups. The fact is that already strong animosities exist between religious groups and very little if any dialogue is presently occurring. At that ecumenical gathering, I suggested that a summit meeting of Hispanic Protestants and Catholics meet in order to begin some kind of dialogue, but since then I have discovered how delicate the relations are and that the summit meeting I suggested may take a good deal of time and effort. At this point, there is not even an agreement in terminology. For example, what for some groups is evangelism, for others is proselytism. For some "freedom of religion" means freedom to evangelize, for others it means freedom from proselytism. This

²"The Challenge of Ecumenism to Hispanic Christians" Address by Bishop Ramírez at the NADEO luncheon in Denver, Colorado, May 5, 1992.

book is not only an example of inter-denominational collaboration by including writers of various Christian traditions, but also by describing joint ecumenical efforts, such as those that continue to take place in Central America.

Small Christian Communities

In the past few decades the Christians of Latin America have contributed in a remarkable way to our understanding of Church. What is so striking is the interplay that has taken place between Latin American theologians and grass roots communities (**comunidades eclesiales de base**). Latin American theology is generally a reflection on the real life, often dramatic, experiences of the people in such a way that the Gospels take on a new and powerful dynamism. The beatitudes, for example, come alive with an awesome vivacity.

The bishops at Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo also have been thoroughly connected with the reality of the people of Latin America. They have struggled, sometimes agonized, in their yearning to respond prophetically to the voice of God in the poor and in victims of injustice.

The theologians of Latin America have powerfully and dramatically underscored that the role of the theologian is a ministry and that the formulation of theology cannot be separated from the real faith and life struggles of people. The theologies of Latin America have legitimized the cry of the poor as a place where God speaks to all of us. In our day we have seen the dynamic power of God's word as it has come through the cry of the poor of those in Latin America who have been martyred for the sake of the Kingdom of peace and justice (e.g., Archbishop Romero, the north American religious women, and the Jesuits of the Universidad Centroamericana). As Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gómez has said, "God through history has chosen to speak to the world through the suffering of peoples." Father Virgilio Elizondo says that the fullness of the paschal mystery is lived out in the crucified people of Latin America. The uniqueness of their witness is that in spite of their crucifixion they have not given in to cynicism nor to desperation, but have formulated a new existence based on authentic hope as inspired in the message of Jesus Christ.

The history of salvation teaches us that salvation often comes from totally unexpected sources. It is out of today's people who suffer that salvation will come to the Americas. I am convinced that the contemporary western hemisphere will be saved by the spirituality of the martyrs of Latin America, by the indigenous peoples of our respective continents, and from those who in this century suffered the crucifixion. It is those who have lived the cross who will have the privilege to announce the resurrection. It is the poor of this hemisphere who will provide us with a new and fresh understanding of the Gospel and will spark life into the rest of us, who all too often forget to feed the heart and soul.

This book is a welcomed contribution to the growing literature that helps us in the mutual understanding between North and Latin America. But more than that, it helps us in our own understanding of ourselves as Christians in these uncertain and troublesome days. I hope and pray that it will have the wide readership that it deserves.

Most Reverend Ricardo Ramírez, C.S.B.
Las Cruces, New Mexico
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