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Signs of life in Latin America

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 1, 2007 All Things Catholic

When President Nicanor Duarte of Paraguay arrived at the Vatican on Monday for a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI, he planned to present the pontiff with a multi-colored poncho as a symbol of Latin America -- home to almost half the world's 1.1 billion Catholics, and a region dubbed by Pope John Paul II as "the Continent of Hope."

In the end, however, Benedict had to settle for an IOU: Duarte's bags got lost somewhere between France and Italy, including his gifts for the pope.

That small snafu offers a metaphor for what has been a recent season of discontent for Benedict XVI with regard to Latin America. Despite the best efforts of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's doctrinal czar, to suppress liberation theology in the 1980s and 1990s, this synthesis of Catholic social doctrine and progressive political action is showing surprising -- and, at least from the pope's point of view, sometimes vexing -- signs of life.

Consider events from just the last several days:

- Venezuela's bishops announced Wednesday that a special delegation is headed to Rome to meet Benedict XVI, both to explain their opposition to a constitutional referendum set for Dec. 2 that would grant leftist President Hugo Chavez sweeping economic powers and allow him to rule almost indefinitely, and to discuss the activity of some Chavez-friendly priests. Inspired by liberation theology, these priests have accused their bishops of reactionary opposition to reform; Fr. Vidal González, for example, a pastor in Zulia state, recently told reporters that the bishops have all but said they'd like Chavez dead. Archbishop Baltazar Porras of Mérida, head of the bishops' communications committee, asserted Wednesday that such priests are "determined to insult the hierarchy" in order to distract attention from the merits of the referendum.
- Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, a Catholic Socialist and graduate of the storied Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, popped up at a Sant'Egidio-sponsored conference in Naples, Italy, last week to call for a "new Catholicism" in the 21st century, which, he said, would challenge globalized capitalism and offer a rebuke to what Correa described as "anti-immigrant U.S. Christians."
- When Benedict XVI and Duarte met Oct. 29, they faced the prospect that Paraguay's next government could be formed by Fernando Lugo, a Catholic bishop who's tendered his resignation but who is officially still on the books. Known as Paraguay's "red bishop" for his commitment to liberation theology, Lugo has

been ordered by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, not to run for public office in national elections set for April, an order Lugo has defied. Polls currently show him in the lead, and at least one of his brother bishops is on board: Bishop Mario Melanio Medina Salinas of the San Juan Bautista de las Misiones diocese has said that he would vote for Lugo "100 times" if that were possible.
- While in Italy on Sunday to receive a peace prize from former Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, Bolivia's leftist President Evo Morales playfully suggested that the Vatican be sent packing to New York while the United Nations relocates to Rome. (Morales has never been a fan of ecclesiastical authority. Last July, he said the Catholic bishops had "historically damaged the country" by functioning as "an instrument of the oligarchs.")

Such church/state tensions in Latin America are often construed as part of the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist mindset of the left, and that's certainly an important ingredient. Given the Catholic history and culture of the continent, however, intra-ecclesiastical skirmishes inevitably also play a role. In effect, what's happened over the last decade is that some of those Catholics most committed to liberation theology have gravitated out of the church and into secular politics. In a number of Latin American countries, the electoral success of leftist populists has given the liberationists a new lease on life.

Lugo, a former Verbite priest and the emeritus bishop of San Fernando in Paraguay, offers the most explicit case in point. Activism runs in his veins; his father was arrested no fewer than 20 times under the regime of former dictator Alfredo Stroessner, and three of his four brothers were expelled from the country for more than 20 years. In 1996, Lugo hosted a continent-wide gathering of base communities, the small faith groups dedicated to spiritual formation and political action associated with liberation theology. In 2004, Lugo supported peasants in his rural diocese who organized to protest unequal land distribution and the inroads of massive commercial agriculture, an experience that helped propel him toward explicit political activism.

Lugo has been careful, however, to position himself as a pragmatist rather than an ideologue.

"When the pope speaks against liberation theology, he speaks against the exaggerations of this theology only, particularly regarding the Marxist message of interpreting reality," Lugo said earlier this month. "But he also accepts that there is a part of it which is accepted by the official church."

Correa is likewise a practicing Catholic who, aside from his degree from Louvain, says that his real education came from working as a lay Salesian missionary in the mid-1980s in the largely indigenous province of Cotopaxi. On the campaign trail, speaking in both Spanish and the indigenous language Qu'chua, Correa routinely invokes Catholic social teaching. In a September address in which Correa attempted to lay out a Socialist vision for the 21st century, he invoked the work of Fr. Leonidas Proaño, probably the most famous liberation theologian in Ecuador.

Chavez is himself backed by a sector of progressive (and often anti-American) grassroots sentiment in the Venezuelan church, including his own court theologian, a Jesuit named Fr. Jesús Gazo, a chaplain at the Universidad Católica del Táchira. Gazo has said that Chavez has "a very strong theological formation." Gazo is not alone in his admiration. Fr. Jesús Silva, a Uruguayan priest, has lived in the Caracas slum of El Valle for 26 years, and claims there is "no doubt" that Chavez is a committed Catholic. The country's "eternally excluded

and exploited social classes," Silva said in May, today feel "they have a man in whom they confide."

In Bolivia, Morales' own police chief is an ex-Jesuit and a staunch liberation theologian, Rafael Puente Calvo, considered one of the president's ideological hardliners. Upon his appointment, a Catholic newspaper in Argentina noted sardonically, "When the revolutionaries need an official to carry out their ideological programs with extreme cruelty, usually they can rely on a lapsed priest." (In one of history's ironies, Puente taught as a Jesuit scholastic in northwestern Spain, where one of his students was Marian Rajoy, today the leader of Spain's center-right People's Party.)

Similar links between some stalwarts of liberation theology and secular political forces can be found wherever the left has come to power in Latin America, such as the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil.

This secular reincarnation of liberation theology, with its inherent tendency to spawn tensions with the Catholic hierarchy, comes atop a series of serious challenges already facing Catholicism in the region. They include the steady erosion of Catholics towards Pentecostalism (more people defected from Catholicism to Protestantism in Latin America in the 20th century than in Europe during the Reformation), and the emergence for the first time of a sociologically significant pool of people, concentrated especially in the impoverished barrios of Latin America's teeming mega-cities, who say they have no religious faith at all.

Despite all this, one can nevertheless make a case for optimism about the future of the church in Latin America.

For one thing, the Pentecostal challenge may be eroding Catholicism's traditional monopoly, but it also seems to be doing what competition usually does -- producing a new sense of hustle. Experts say it's awakening a church that for centuries sometimes seemed content to baptize, marry and bury its people, offering little else by way of formation or pastoral care.

In the forthcoming volume *How Latin America Saved the Soul of the Catholic Church* (Paulist Press), Dominican Fr. Edward Cleary, a longtime observer of the region, argues that that Latin America today is actually in the grip of a major religious revival, with the surge in Pentecostalism representing its leading edge. Catholicism, Cleary says, is also becoming more dynamic, generating higher levels of commitment among those who remain. Cleary believes that this Catholic awakening had its roots in lay movements that go back to the 1930s and 40s, but it's been jump-started by healthy competitive pressure. In effect, Cleary argues, recent Latin American experience confirms what believers in the United States have long understood -- an open religious marketplace, unfettered by an established church, is healthy for churches all the way around.

As one bit of evidence, Clearly cites vocations to the priesthood. In Honduras, the national seminary had an enrollment of 170 in 2007, an all-time high for a country where the total number of priests is slightly more than 400. Twenty years ago, there were fewer than 40 candidates. Bolivia saw the most remarkable increase; in 1972, the entire country had 49 seminarians, while in 2001 the number was 714, representing growth of 1,357 percent. Overall, seminarians in Latin America have increased 440 percent in the last two decades, according to Cleary.

This new social capital intersects with a new spirit among the Latin American bishops, who in the main seem determined to avoid the ideological fractures of the past and to strike a more pastoral and evangelical tone.

During the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, held last May in Aparecida, Brazil, the bishops effectively endorsed a moderate form of liberation theology, centered on four points:

- The option for the poor
- The concept of structural sin
- The "see-judge-act" pastoral method
- Base communities

The bishops' assessment was clear from the decision to meet with a group of liberation theologians prior to the opening of the conference, and from the fact that several acted as theological advisors. Asked about the relationship, Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras told the press, "There is no opposition or antagonism, by any means. We have been open to them from the beginning, and I can say that we remain in contact with them." Bishop Roque Paloschi of Roraima, Brazil, was blunt: "The theology of liberation lives."

Given that stance, it's conceivable that the mainstream leadership of the church may be able to work out a *modus vivendi* with Latin America's new leftist governments, focused on pragmatic social policy and economic development that benefits the poor, while unleashing the church's new missionary energies to help build a more dynamic civil society. Doing so might allow church leaders to more persuasively challenge the anti-democratic and extremist features of regimes such as Venezuela under Chavez, without coming off as apologists for ecclesiastical privilege.

While a Latin American recovery of Aristotle's insight that virtue falls between two extremes might not convert the Hugo Chavezes of the world, it could at least help the Catholic church to avoid being backed into a cycle of endless opposition to the new forces today shaping a sizeable chunk of the continent, positioning the church instead to help those forces realize the best version of themselves.

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