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Bishops hear update on Latin American drive to rev up missionary efforts

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 17, 2009 NCR Today

Though it?s a point sometimes lost in American Catholic debate, the roughly seventy million Catholics in the United States represent just six percent of the global Catholic population of almost 1.2 billion. That would seem to imply the need for some attention to Catholic dynamics outside American airspace, and today the U.S. bishops made a nod in that direction, hearing a report on the 2007 assembly of the Latin American bishops in Aparecida, Brazil.

Archbishop Roberto Nieves Gonzalez of San Juan, Puerto Rico, tried to sum up the main points of the month-long gathering during an afternoon address to the spring meeting of the U.S. bishops in San Antonio, Texas.

Nieves covered a lot of ground, but he suggested that the lasting importance of Aparecida, the fifth general gathering of Latin American bishops since 1955, may be its missionary thrust. In their concluding document, the Latin American bishops suggested that the entire Christian life can be understood in terms of being a ?disciple missionary.?

The signature idea of Aparecida was the ?Great Continental Mission,? meaning a coordinated continent-wide missionary effort unfolding at the diocesan level.

Nieves called the Continental Mission ?the most significant, concrete resolution? from the Aparecida meeting ? though at the same time, Nieves said that the process used in the meeting, involving a wide network of consultation and dialogue, ?is more important than the document.?

tAt least in part, the missionary concern of the Latin American bishops reflected the striking exodus out of the Catholic church in some parts of the continent.

Belgian Passionist Fr. Franz Damen, a veteran staffer for the Bolivian bishops, concluded in the 1990s that conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism in Latin America during the 20th century actually surpassed the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 16th century. A study commissioned in the late 1990s by CELAM, the Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, found that 8,000 Latin Americans were deserting the Catholic Church every day.

A 2005 poll by Latinobarometro, a Chile-based firm that conducts polls in 17 Latin American countries found that 71 percent of Latin Americans considered themselves Roman Catholic in 2004, down from 80 percent in 1995. If that trend continues at its current pace, the authors speculated, only 50 percent of Latin Americans would identify themselves as Catholics by 2025.

Nieves said that the Continental Mission is designed to unfold in four stages over 2009-2012, beginning with raising awareness and deepening formation, and then moving to work with various sectors of society and geographic regions.

In a brief floor discussion, some bishops noted that given the increasing share of the American Catholic population composed of Hispanics, including recent immigrants, perhaps the model of Christians as "disciple missionaries," as well as the idea of a "continental mission," could be promoted in the United States as well.

Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, for example, urged committees of the U.S. conference "to really study this document and draw on its rich resources," as a step towards promoting "the globalization of hope."

Nieves said a regular inter-American meeting of Catholic bishops has discussed how the insights of Aparecida might be applied in the context of the United States.

Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, however, lamented what he described as declining interest in Latin America within the U.S. Catholic community as compared to the 1970s and 1980s, when the Cold War and the struggles against police states in the region kept a spotlight on Latin America.

"Perhaps democracy is less interesting that dictatorship," Ramirez said.

Ramirez suggested that perhaps some Latin American bishops could be invited to join regular meetings of the USCCB, as one way to promote solidarity across the continent.

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