

# **LATIN AMERICA - An historical perspective on the politics of the Catholic Church in Latin America (Michael Hogan, ZNET)**

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*November 21, 2005 - [ZNET](#) - When the conservative Catholic cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI, many observers saw this as the beginning of a reactionary period for the Catholic Church with the Cardinal's well-known opposition to female clergy, gay unions, cloning, freedom of choice, ecumenical movements, use of contraceptives to prevent AIDS, liberation theology, community organization of lay Catholics, and social activism. To those who have followed the politics of the Church in Latin America, however, his election came as no surprise and is clearly seen, not as a new position of the Church, but one which began in the 1980's.*

Cardinal Ratzinger, well-known as the Vatican enforcer for Pope John Paul, ordered the 1984 "silencing" of liberation theologians, forbidding them to publish their work, and removing bishops who supported their views, as well as declaring Rome's opposition to the social activism and organizations for self-help which priests in impoverished regions had long regarded as central to their Christian mission.

To understand what this has meant to the poor and disenfranchised populations in Latin America and what the election of this cardinal to the papacy is likely to mean in the years ahead, it is useful to look back at recent history-most notably in Central America.

EL SALVADOR: Archbishop Oscar Romero was a traditional prelate when appointed to his position in El Salvador in the 70s. What made him exceptional as time passed was that he paid attention to the poor and disenfranchised in his congregation. He listened when they told him stories of family members kidnapped by government death squads when they tried to organize agricultural workers, or when they spoke out against government policies of repression. He looked at the pictures of the tortured bodies of civilians who opposed the repressive regime, and he wrote to the authorities asking for help to put an end to the fear and oppression in which his parishioners lived. When the government was unresponsive, he began to reflect on the need for these people to organize to obtain redress and change their situation. He realized that the conservative tradition of the Church in Latin America: allied to the plutocracy, catering to the rich, and helping the poor solely through the distribution of alms to those most needy, merely served to perpetuate injustice. He felt that the poor and powerless had the right to try and alter their situation through self-help organizations, through education and community action. He also felt that the Church had an obligation through its leadership to assist this process in concrete ways.

His efforts to serve these parishioners offended not only the repressive government and the upper classes, but even his wealthy parishioners (Opus Dei) who felt the Church was undermining their privileges. When he baptized Indian babies in the same baptismal font as the privileged white babies, they were outraged. His support of lay Catholic self-help groups was attacked as socialist activism. And, when he stood in the pulpit and called for an end to the violence against opposition groups by the government, he was shot down in broad daylight.

At his funeral, held on March 30, 1980 at the Cathedral, government troops opened fire on the overflow crowd. The massacre left 44 dead and hundreds wounded. Among the witnesses that day was Maryknoll lay missionary, Jean Donovan.

A year later, Jean Donovan, along with two Maryknoll nuns-Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel an Ursuline sister, were abducted, raped and shot to death by National Guardsmen. The next day peasants

discovered their bodies alongside an isolated road buried in a shallow grave. Everyone familiar with the case knew that these women were killed by National Guardsmen and that it had to have been approved by the government.<sup>1</sup> Yet, when the Pope visited El Salvador in 1983, he purposely refused to address the murder of his bishop, or those of Jean Donovan and the nuns. He pointedly said the purpose of the Church was to teach that Jesus is the Son of God and provide spiritual counsel to the flock. Privately, he met with the priests and nuns in El Salvador and told them to discontinue their involvement with community self-help groups. He replaced the murdered Archbishop Romero with a conservative, giving him identical instructions in an effort to restore the Church to its former alliance with those in power—no matter how corrupt or complicit in organized violence—for which the Church was notorious a century before.

NICARAGUA: The day before the Pope's visit to Managua in 1983, 17 members of a youth organization who had been murdered by Somoza's soldiers were buried after a memorial program in the same plaza where the Pope John Paul II was to say Mass. It was hoped by most of the mothers and young people in attendance, that the Pope would make some sympathetic remarks about the deaths of these teenagers. He did not. Instead he gave a sermon which demanded that the people of Nicaragua abandon their "untenable ideological commitments," and urged the bishops to be united. Previously, he had chastised Fr. Roberto Cardenal at the airport for his association with the farm workers association, so a few in the congregation knew that no expression of unity with the people was likely to be forthcoming. Many others, however, believing the Pope was truly on the side of the people, began to chant: "A prayer for our dead" and "We want peace."<sup>2</sup> The Pope ignored them and finished his sermon. At the consecration, one of the mothers of the murdered boys broke in with a megaphone to say: "Holy Father, we beg you for a prayer for our loved ones who have been murdered."<sup>3</sup> The Pope, not only did not offer that prayer but skipped the Lord's Prayer as well with its tradition "sign of peace." He offered Communion to a few dignitaries, gave the last blessing, and exited.

Later the BBC announcer would call it one of the "most unusual Masses in this Pope's career." For President Daniel Ortega, who asked the Pope before leaving for a solid proposal for peace in Nicaragua, to say "one word which would strengthen the people," it was more than unusual. It was the turning away of this representative of the Prince of Peace from a clear opportunity to have an impact. To say that he left behind many alienated Catholics is an understatement.

It has been said by insiders that when the Pope asked what the people were shouting during the Mass ("Queremos paz!" We want peace!), he was told by one of his aides that it was of no importance, and that those calling out were Communists. With his own experience of Communism in Eastern Europe, this statement was like flashing a red cape before a bull. Not long after, the liberal bishops were replaced by conservatives as the Pope encouraged by Ratzinger (who wrote a thesis on the subject) was shown alleged links between elements of liberation theology and Marxism. "The Pope began listening to those who were portraying liberation theology in caricatures—priests with guns, Marxists—and they just weren't accurate,"<sup>4</sup> said Dean Brackley, a theology professor at a Jesuit university in Latin America. The following year, leading Brazilian liberation theologian, Leonard Boff, was ordered to Rome in 1984 and sentenced to a year of "obsequious silence" by Cardinal Ratzinger's committee during which time he was denied permission to publish or to teach publicly. He has since resigned from the Franciscan order.<sup>5</sup>

PREFERENTIAL OPTION: It could easily have been otherwise without Ratzinger's influence. Pope John Paul II also was familiar with the Solidarity Movement in Poland was far more similar to the farm organizations, rural artisan groups in El Salvador and Nicaragua than with Marxism. But the die had been cast and the Church abandoned two decades of social activism and the "preferential option for the poor" to return to the "benevolent absence" which characterized so much of the Latin America hierarchy in the years of the dictators.

The preferential option for the poor and vulnerable was a concept that had evolved in the early Sixties and became part of the Church philosophy at the Conferences of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Colombia (1968) and in Puebla, Mexico in 1979). Essentially it noted that there was a growing awareness of solidarity of the poor among themselves, their efforts to support one another, and their public demonstrations which, without recourse to violence, presented their own needs and rights in the face of

the inefficiency or corruption of public authorities. "By virtue of her own evangelical duties" the bishops stated, the Church must stand beside the poor, to discern the justice of their requests and to help satisfy them without losing sight of the common good."<sup>6</sup> The bishops went on to say that, "As followers of Christ we are challenged to make a preferential option for the poor, namely, to create conditions for marginalized voices to be heard, to defend the defenseless, and to assess lifestyle, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. The option for the poor does not mean pitting one group against another, but rather, it calls us to strengthen the whole community by assisting those who are most vulnerable."<sup>7</sup>

CARDINAL RETZINGER'S REVERSAL: "An analysis of "liberation theology," wrote Cardinal Ratzinger in 1984, "reveals that it constitutes a fundamental threat to the faith of the Church." He goes on to discover "radically marxist (sic) positions" in those who teach the theology and, although he acknowledges that "no error could persist unless it contained a grain of truth...an error is all the more dangerous, the greater that grain of truth is."<sup>8</sup> The grain of truth, of course, is the mission of Christ and his apostles as defined by the Gospels, most notably by the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus clearly affirms the "option for the poor." Cardinal Ratzinger replies that this is an amalgam of a basic truth of Christianity and an un-Christian fundamental option, which seductive and has the semblance of truth. "The Sermon the Mount is indeed God taking sides with the poor," he writes. "But interpreting the poor in the sense of the marxist (sic) dialectic of history, and taking sides with them in the sense of class struggle, is a wanton attempt to portray as identical things that are contrary" While acknowledging the "irresistible logic of the liberation theologians, Cardinal Ratzinger suggests that this new interpretation of Christianity is tainted, that we should return to the "logic of faith, and present it as the logic of reality,"<sup>9</sup> and that theologians, priests, lay people and nuns cannot interpret God's word, only the Church in her authority.

The order to silence the liberation theologians which came shortly thereafter, not only deprived professors of their jobs, priests of their most salient message to the poor, and removed bishops from their dioceses to be replaced by men who agreed with Cardinal Ratizinger, it also had a more deadly effect. It sent a message to the repressive regimes in Latin America that these people did not have the protection or support of the Church. Lay missionaries, nuns, priests, teachers, even aid workers, were immediately seen as soft targets for the repressive regimes. One of the most brutal massacres which followed was the assault on the Central America University (UCA) in San Salvador. There, in the early hours of November 16, 1989, soldiers entered the Jesuit residence and assassinated the university president, Fr. Ignacio Ellcuria, and five other priests. Their cook Elba Ramos and her daughter Cecelia, who asked to stay the night for their own safety since soldiers had surrounded the campus, were also murdered.<sup>10</sup>

The murders of the Jesuit priests at the university sent a message to all of those associated with liberation theology. With the withdrawal of the Rome's support for their work, with the clear import of Cardinal Retinzer's "Instruction" that this was a Marxist tainted movement, everyone working in Latin America outside official government channels was vulnerable. The priests at the university were teachers and scholars. Fr. Ellacuria, a Madrid native, was internationally known as an educator and was even friends with former U.N. ambassador Jean Kirkpatrick. In the words of Fr. Charles Beirne, S.J., "They were priests, not partisan politicians. They dealt with the polis, the poor, and they explored the ethical dimensions of the national reality. For this they were silenced."<sup>11</sup>

THE RED HERRING OF MARXISM: Jean Donovan, the lay missionary who was murdered along with the nuns in El Salvador, was the daughter of a Sikorsky aircraft engineer from Westport, Connecticut. Raised in relative affluence, she had a masters degree in business administration from Case Western Reserve, was a dedicated Catholic and a lifelong Republican.

Well on her way to a successful management career in Cleveland, in 1979 she volunteered though her local church to work at a mission in El Salvador with the organization Caritas, after hearing of the work of Bishop Romero and the desperate plight of the children in that country. Shortly after her arrival in Central America, her letters home began to note mounting evidence of the connection between U.S. policies and the violence in El Salvador.<sup>12</sup> With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and his promise of a strong stand against "Communism" in Central America, she saw that the U.S. had effectively given the repressive

regimes in that region exactly what they needed: a free hand to eliminate opposition, stifle worker organization, and intimidate (or even eliminate) relief workers whose support of “the people” rather than “the government” could be interpreted as Marxist. “Things grew progressively worse in El Salvador after the U.S. election...The military believed they were given a blank check-no restrictions.”<sup>13</sup>

The conflation of Catholic social work and Marxism by both governments had its effect. Reagan administration officials parroted the Salvadoran government’s excuse for the rape-murders, saying that the women had “run a roadblock,” and were “not just nuns but political activists.” When the Donovan family approached the State Department for information regarding the apprehension of those responsible for the murder of their daughter, they were treated coolly and then with hostility. The American government, which they had formerly believed in so strongly as a bastion of justice, now appeared allied with the forces of repression. Eventually they were told to stop bothering State Department officials. The final insult occurred when they received a bill from the State Department for \$3,500 for the return of Jean’s body.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the head of the National Guard who was responsible for the murders, Gen. Eugenio Vides Casanova, went on to become Minister of Defense under the U.S.-supported, “democratic” regime of José Napoleón Duarte. And thus the revolutionary era of the 80’s came to an end in Central America.

What followed in the 90’s was a retreat from activism on the part of the Catholic hierarchy, the replacement of hundreds of bishops by more conservative prelates, a ban on teaching liberation theology in the universities, the silencing of major Latin American theologians, and a slow retreat of the Church from social activism. In Central America, local organizations have since lost much of their initiative and support, and true democracy has disappeared to be replaced with neoliberal “show” democracy in which one of the two wealthiest candidates gets to take control of the government with the blessings of the U.S. Today, war-ravaged El Salvador and Nicaragua, as well as Guatemala, are worse off than they were fifty years ago, with more than half the population receiving less than the minimal daily food intake for sustenance, with high unemployment, war and hurricane-damaged infrastructure, skyrocketing illiteracy rates, juvenile crime waves, and hopelessness. The charitable soup kitchens and food baskets of 2005 are a far cry from the self-help groups, organized campesinos, trade unions, and health clinics that the Church help organize and support in the 1980’s.

In South America (with Venezuela, Brazil and Uruguay being exceptions), most countries have surrendered their political autonomy to the IMF, the World Bank and corporate investors. In some of these countries, most notably Brazil, liberation theology has deepened and broadened, especially where it is apparent that only pastoral work can serve the poor whom the State and neoliberal policies have left behind. In Venezuela, the vacuum left by the loss of an activist Church has been filled by the populism of President Chavez who, fueled by the U.S. premature “recognition” of his replacement during an unsuccessful coup attempt,<sup>15</sup> has created a war economy (“Avoid the U.S. Invasion, Pay Your Taxes”)<sup>16</sup> while carefully distributing some of the oil largess to the most visible of the needy sectors.

Attempting to compete with the large numbers of poor who now flock to Christian evangelical churches where they can sing away their blues, praise the Lord, and hope for a better world after death, the new Pope (with the recruitment help of Opus Dei) has begun searching for young, good-looking, charismatic priests who can run the same type of operation with the Catholic imprimatur. They have had some limited successes especially with youth camps and rallies in which young people gather in open fields to attend what appear to be Christian versions of Sixties rock concerts. Pope Benedict’s call for a new “evangelical mission” in recent communications in Latin America seems to be basically this: a removal of the Church from any real effort to work for social justice in Latin America and a decision to compete, not for souls, but for audiences in a new evangelical movement, where hymns, invocations of the Holy Spirit and shouted amens and allelulas will provide an other-worldly escape from reality, and where religion will finally become, as Marx so prophetically noted, merely an opiate of the people. The genuine irony is, of course, that liberation theology and the option for the poor which Cardinal Ratzinger denigrated as Marxist, was a clear and powerful alternative to Marxism, and, unlike populism and the militarism which will likely follow as the populist movements fail to deliver, it continues to be the last best hope of empowering people to change their lives, to create grass roots democratic movements, and to form safe,

self-sufficient and prosperous communities.

#### NOTES:

1. There are numerous sources which recount in detail what happened to Jean Donovan and the three nuns. Among the best is the recent book: *Salvador Witness: The Life and Calling of Jean Donovan* by Ann Carrigan. Obis Books. Maryknoll, NY. 2005 from which some of this background is drawn.
2. From "The 1983 Visit of Pope John Paul II to Nicaragua" by Katherine Hoyt.  
[http://www.hartford\\_hwp.com/archives/47/030.html](http://www.hartford_hwp.com/archives/47/030.html)  
This is the text of a letter written by Hoyt to her parents a few days after the Pope visit to Managua. It was later posted on the web because of the authoritative nature of the account. Hoyt is the national coordinator of the Nicaragua Network Education Fund.
3. Ibid. The quotes which follow are all from Hoyt's account.
4. The Dean Brackley quote is from "Part of the Flock Felt Abandoned by the Pope" by Cris Kraul and Henry Chu. L.A. Times, April 10, 2005.  
<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-libtheology10apr10,0,4626986.story>
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. From "An Introduction to the Principles of Catholic Social Thought. University of Notre Dame.  
<http://www.centerforsocialconcerns.nd.edu/mission/cst/cst4.shtml>
7. Ibid. p.1
8. From "Preliminary Notes to Liberation Theology" by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger which preceded the "Instruction" of Fall, 1984. <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/retzinger/liberationtheol.htm>
9. Ratzinger, op. cit., Sec. III, "Central Concepts of Liberation Theology."
10. Ibid. pp.7-8.
11. This information is from the Religious Task Force on Central America located at UCA, where the Jesuits were murdered. See "Martyrs of the University of Central America."  
<http://www.rftcam.org/martyrs/UCA/UCA.htm>
12. "Ordinary People Made Extraordinary" by Fr. Charles Beirne, S.J.  
<http://www.companysj.com/w171/ordinary.html>
13. From "Jean Donovan: Except for the Children."  
[http://www.rftcam.org/martyrs/women/jean\\_donovan.htm](http://www.rftcam.org/martyrs/women/jean_donovan.htm)
14. Ibid. Quote is attributed to her mother, Patricia.
15. Ibid., p. 4.
16. In an April 13, 2002 editorial following the attempted coup, the New York Times declared, "Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator." The Times went on to explain that Chavez was "forced down by the military and replaced by a business leader." Three days later, the Times offered a slightly apologetic retraction: "Mr. Chavez has been such a divisive and demagogic leader that his departure last week drew applause at home and in Washington. That reaction, which we shared, overlooked the undemocratic manner in which he was removed. Forcibly unseating a democratic leader, no matter how badly he has performed, is never something to cheer."
17. This was on a banner viewed by the author near the Caracas airport on October 20, 2005.

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<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=20&ItemID=9169>