

Questions raised concerning ecumenical relationships in Latin America

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--In spite of recent ecumenical overtures from the newly elected president of Roman Catholic Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), and Vatican statements calling for increased ecumenical contacts, Protestant ecumenical leaders have expressed doubts that any formal relationship will develop in the near future.

"In Latin America there have never been formal ecumenical relations between the Catholic and Protestant Churches," Felipe Adolf, General Secretary of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) told NNI.

"The Catholic church has never recognized the non-Catholic expressions in Latin America as churches of Jesus Christ," he said.

Adolf said that during the 1960's and 1970's there were good relations between individuals from both groups, but those relationships never developed into any formal dialogue, cooperation, or recognition by the Catholic church of the legitimacy of Protestant churches.

Responding to the call of Honduran Archbishop Oscar Rodriguez who urged "a largeness of heart to open our arms to our brothers in the evangelical churches in healthy ecumenism," Adolf said that in recent years relations between Catholic and Protestant churches have reduced. Now, he said, they take the form only of bilateral relations, for example Catholic-Anglican, Catholic-Lutheran, and Catholic-Baptist.

Adolf said he thinks the Catholic churches prefer to relate one on one rather than with the whole of non-Catholic churches.

In fact, Adolf said, "ecumenism does not figure on the agenda of the Catholic church in Latin America. It has not been a priority."

Adolf attributes this lack of concern to the dominating role the Catholic church has played in Latin America for the past 500 years until just a few years ago.

"For many people, to be Catholic and to be Latin American was the same. That which gave identity to Latin Americans was the Roman Catholic religion," he said.

"The less-numerous Evangelicals were people who came from outside who were not part of this culture, and thus were strangers to this (Latin American-Roman Catholic) reality. Therefore, it has been easy for Roman Catholics to easily talk about 'sects'."

Protestants reject the term "sects" in strong words. "That is a classification what we do not accept," said Manuel Quintero, Director of the Department of Communications for CLAI. "Each day

(evangelical churches) acquire more importance, each day they attract more people, including numerous Catholics which convert," he said.

Adolf, a member of the Congregational church from the Entre Rios department of Argentina, reflected on the willingness of the Catholic Church to dialogue with Lutherans, Anglicans, and portions of the Methodist church, while it prefers to have no cooperation with other more evangelical churches. "The big problem for the Catholic Church are those groups or churches which have as their goal to convert, to bring new people into the church," he said.

"The worry of the Catholic church began with the birth and extraordinary growth of the Pentecostal churches in Latin America, and other independent churches. These new churches have as their fundamental work to incorporate new people. I think that this is one of the reasons that the Catholic church is able to say that those non Roman Catholic churches are sects, and that these groups are wounding the culture of the Latin American people, he said."

Despite general pessimism about Catholic-Protestant relations in the region, Adolf says he holds some hope that the situation might improve. "Ecumenism is being rethought in Latin America," he said. "Until now, ecumenism has not been on the agenda of the Catholic church on the continent, however, I see some positive signals after the latest Papal encyclical on ecumenism. They are beginning to rethink the issue."

"It is certain that the Pope, in his encyclical "Ut Unum Sint--That They May Be One," has affirmed that ecumenism is part of the church. He said that the relations between churches is an essential part of the church and that dialogue among the churches has to change our attitudes," Adolf said.

"I think this is what we ought to understand from Archbishop Rodriguez, the new president of CELAM. The Catholic church is beginning to understand that they cannot continue thinking nor declaring that all of the other non-Catholic Christian expressions are sects," Adolf told NNI.

Adolf said that Protestants have received mixed signals from the Roman Catholic church regarding its desire for dialogue and cooperation in Latin America. He referred to the encyclical and the statements of Bishop Rodriguez, compared to recent statements by Pope John Paul II in which he said that some Protestant "sects" are spreading like "an oil stain" and "threaten to pull down the structures of faith in numerous countries." The pontiff also charged that some "sects are destroying the faith of the people."

Adolf responded to these conflicting signals, saying "The Pope is able to write many things in Rome, but (others) do what they want. It seems to me that to refuse to talk with the other churches can be interpreted as disobedience to the Pope."

Quintero, a layman from Cuba serving with CLAI in Quito, said, "I think that within the Catholic Church there are different forces in conflict: those who want to open dialogue and recognize the reality of religious plurality, and other sectors who, in contrast, try deliberately to fortify the regional hegemonic role of the church."

Quintero pointed to recent legislation in Ecuador and Bolivia as an example of more conservative forces wishing to maintain the traditional role of the church. He said that because of this internal struggle, "it is difficult to carry out an ecumenical dialogue with the evangelical churches."

Adolf said, "My reading of all of this is that the Roman Catholic church is convinced that in the long run it is going to lose religious hegemony, and I think that in some cases it has already done that."

The ecumenical leader said that many of the church's programs in Latin America are not only to recoup religious dominance, but also to maintain political power. "The Catholic Church feels the threat of losing not only its sociological majority, but also is suffering a loss of its spiritual, social and political influence," Adolf said.

Therefore, he said, "In Latin America we find this contradiction for Catholicism between putting into practice what comes from Rome, where the Pope says that ecumenism is crucial for the church, and at the same time, to know that the church may no longer be the majority and that other Christian expressions exist in Latin America."

"For me, my working hypothesis is that the Catholic Church fundamentally wants to maintain political power, not religious (power)," he said.

Looking to the future, Adolf said that ecumenical relations among Protestant groups will become more important. As Protestants become more numerous, he said, they will need to develop a common evangelical identity in the face of Roman Catholic dominance and influence. And, he said, as a bishop faces more and more Protestant churches and members, he will need to come to grips with growing Protestant influence in his community.

Adolf said that it should be easy for Protestants and Catholics to work together on issues such as the environment, poverty, street children. It actually would be easier, he said, for Catholics to become involved ecumenically in these issues than Protestants, because of internal concerns among some Protestant groups.

Adolf said that the Latin American Council of Churches plans to be in touch with Archbishop Rodriguez soon to follow up on his comments, and to seek dialogue with the Catholic Church. He said

that his organization and CELAM do not have any permanent dialogue or cooperation.

He said, however, that he believes that the bishop had in mind dialogue and cooperation with the more traditional denominations, such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Anglicans, as opposed to those who are more active in evangelism.

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