

Protestants react strongly to Pope's "sect" remarks

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Protestant leaders in Latin America have reacted strongly to statements of Pope John Paul II that Protestant "sects" are spreading like "an oil stain" and "threaten to pull down the structures of faith in numerous countries."

The Pontiff had strongly denounced the "danger" of various Protestant "sects" to the Roman Catholic church in Latin America. The pontiff had sent a message to a September conference of Latin American church leaders meeting to discuss the expansion of non-Catholic groups in Latin America.

The term "sects" is "a classification that we do not accept," said Manuel Quintero, Director of the Department of Communications for the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI).

"The Catholic church is in a very difficult situation in Latin America," Quintero told NNI. In the long run, Quintero said, the church is playing a power game, "spiritual, political and economic."

"The so-called sects acquire more power every day, each day they attract more people, including Catholics which convert to become members of these churches and new religious movements, he said." The loss of members to Protestant church is what worries the Catholic church, he said.

The Roman Catholic church is concerned about its diminishing social and political influence in Latin America, Quintero said. "In other words, at the bottom of the problem is the worry of having to give up levels of power."

Felipe Adolf, General Secretary of CLAI agreed with Quintero. "My reading of all of this is that the Roman Catholic Church is convinced that in the long run they are going to lose religious hegemony."

Adolf, a member of the Congregational church in Argentina, said that fear has lead to Roman Catholic support for religious teaching in public schools in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia.

The church will continue to exert influence in Latin America, he told NNI. "In the majority of Latin American countries it is very difficult to name a Minister of Education without consulting the Catholic Church."

"The Catholic Church is determined to maintain its political power in Latin America," Adolf said.

The object of the conference was to study strategies to confront the propagation of the sects and new religious movements, according to a Vatican communique on the conference.

European experts and Catholic representatives from throughout Latin America participated in the conference in early September in Petropolis, Brazil.

On the same theme, Pope John Paul II told visiting bishops from Brazil that "certain sects are destroying the faith of the people, at times in a violent manner." He charged that protestant groups are attacking "the mystery of the Eucharist, the Holy Virgin, the ecclesiastical structure of the church, the primacy of the Pope, and the expressions of popular piety."

The Pontiff also expressed his concern about "the psychological pressure exercised by certain sects on new believers, that promise to help them financially and cure their health problems."

He condemned those who he said continue to receive the sacrament in the Catholic church but contribute money to other churches, "cults" or philanthropic organizations.

The pope said that the origin of this phenomenon is "a panorama of religious and doctrinal ignorance" that leaves the people "at the mercy of pernicious influences in a society where moral permissiveness reigns."

CLAI General Secretary Felipe Adolf said that he was concerned about charges that non-catholic groups are destroying the faith. "I am critical of certain Evangelical groups in Latin America because of their attitude toward poor and humble people, because there are cases in Latin America where there seems to be a commercialization of faith and abuse of the gullible and pious. However, we also know of priests and Catholic bishops who profit by the faith of the humble to manipulate them."

The Pope encouraged the Brazilian bishops to redouble their evangelism efforts which he said had been timid and uncertain.

He called on the Latin American Catholic Church to go door to door, street to street, and to be present in all places and by all means.

In their September meeting, the Latin American church leadership called on the family to carry out its role as the "first school of evangelism" to assure that its members understand the Catholic faith. It said that ignorance of the faith is where the "sects" find fertile ground.

Meanwhile, in Brazil where the Bishop's meeting took place, Catholic-Protestant relations have reached a boiling point.

A senior Brazilian Roman Catholic bishop urged Catholics to remain calm

after an evangelical preacher, while preaching on television, slapped and kicked a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"Don't accept provocation, however insidious it may be, don't meet insult with insult, don't repay evil with evil," Lucas

Moreira Neves, president of the Brazilian Bishops Conference, said in a television interview.

Reuters news service reported that tensions between the Catholic hierarchy and leaders of the powerful Church of the Universal Kingdom of God had been running high since preacher Sergio Von Helder lashed out at the statue of Our Lady of Aparecida on Oct. 12.

Police have charged Von Helder with violating the beliefs of others.

Several Universal Kingdom temples were pelted with stones shortly after the slapping incident.

Neves, who was in the Vatican when the broadcast was made, said the pope had been "shocked" by the incident.

From humble beginnings in 1977 as an offshoot of the Pentecostal Church, the Universal Church has grown rich on donations from its mostly poor worshippers and is one of the leading evangelical groups challenging the Catholic Church in Brazil.

It now owns 2,100 churches in Brazil and around the world as well as television and radio stations, a newspaper and a bank and has representatives in Brazil's Congress.

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