

The Contemporary Roman Catholic Faith In Latin America

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There is a danger in generalizing about Roman Catholicism in Latin America because, like the United States, Latin America is multicultural, as the debate about which name best describes the diverse peoples who live south of the Rio Grande suggests. *Hispanoamérica*, identifies the Spanish language spoken by most of the population. *Iberoamérica* combines America with the Iberian Peninsula and by that includes Portuguese-speaking Brazil. The French during the nineteenth century invented the term *América Latina* to recognize other Romance language and cultural influences such as French in the Caribbean and Italian in Argentina and Uruguay. Advocates of Indian rights prefer *Indoamérica* to reflect the profound influence of pre-Colombian civilization on Mexico, Central America, and the Andean countries. *Eurindia* has been suggested to reflect more emphatically than *Indoamérica* the combination of Indian and European influence, since half of the 400 million citizens of Latin America are mestizos, thus affirming Bolivar's argument that Latin Americans have formed a new race that is neither African, Indian, Mestizo, nor European.² Because most Latin immigrants to the United States have come since World War II, it is still sometimes overlooked that the Bureau of the Census estimated that in 1990 over 17 million people spoke Spanish in their homes, up from 11½ million in 1980.³ This population group, whether it is the Puerto Ricans in the Northeast, the Cubans in Florida, or the Mexicans in the southwest,⁴ is in continual contact with their homelands, as illustrated by the popularity of the "Mundo Latino" broadcast on channel two from Mexico City, which considers Spanish-speaking Hispanics in the United States as part of its audience. As with our ancestors who did not lose German until the World Wars, so second and third generation Hispanics today are not far removed from the religious heritage of their ancestral homelands. From the Canadian border to Tierra del Fuego each population group and region has given its own interpretation to Roman Catholicism, often syncretizing it to African and Indian ancestral religions in the Caribbean, Brazil, Mexico, Central America, and the Andes, and protestantizing it in the United States so that Latin American religious unity is more apparent than real.⁵

Nonetheless, certain basic tenets pertain to all regions of Latin America because the medieval and counter-reformation Catholicism of the Iberian Peninsula was the primary source for most teaching and practice in Latin America and because Latin America was isolated by the inquisition and colonial policies from the rest of the world until the early nineteenth century. Therefore, it is still possible and beneficial to examine some primary aspects of the current Catholic faith in Latin America. We will do so by reviewing five key areas of Catholic doctrine and practice, first considering the post Vatican II official position in each case and then observing how that is applied in Latin America. Our applications will focus primarily on Mexico due to this writer's experience. We will conclude with a series of theses that reflect the WELS missionary experience in Mexico which, in this writer's opinion, merits consideration throughout Latin America. The five areas of doctrinal focus are: 1) Revelation, 2) Mariolatry, 3) Church and Ministry, 4) Church and Society, and 5) Justification.

¹ Originally presented at the Arizona-California Pastoral Conference in Tucson on October 28, 1987, the essay was revised and presented at the WELS-ELS Latin American Missionary Conference in Santiago, Chile on January 13, 1993. The author is the director of WELS Mass Communications for Latin American Missions headquartered in El Paso, Texas.

² In his address to the Congress of Angostura (cf. Eugenio Chang-Rodriguez, *Latinoamérica su civilización y cultura*, Harper Collins, New York, 1991, p. 399).

³ Robert Famighetti, Editor, *The World Almanac*, Funk & Wagnalls, 1995, p. 600.

⁴ The frontier cities of northern Mexico due to the maquiladora industry are the fastest growing cities in Mexico, thus heightening the Latin influence along the southern US border, an area which some sociologists think of as a third nation, neither Mexican nor American.

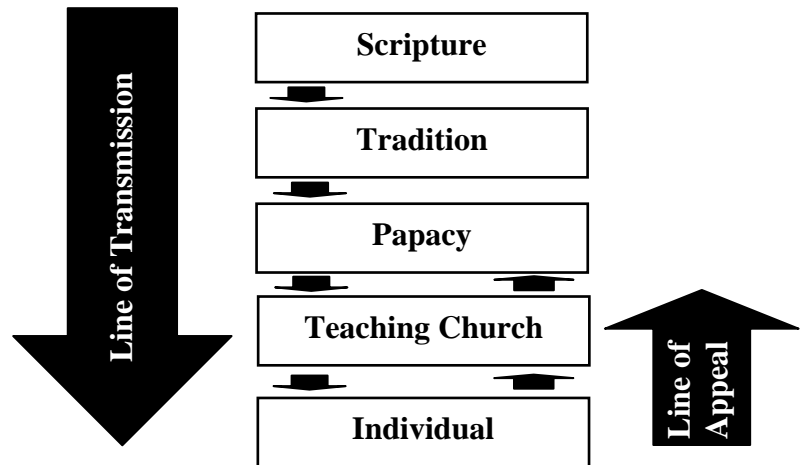
⁵ Chang-Rodriguez, op. cit., p. 410.

Part I: Revelation

Basic to understanding a Latin American's religious heritage is knowing what the Catholic Church means by revelation. Our classic summation—orthodox Lutheranism accepts *sola scriptura*, Catholicism accepts Scripture plus tradition as interpreted by the magisterium—still holds true, with the change that Catholicism now employs higher-critical hermeneutics resulting in an even lower view of Scripture than formerly held.

Tridentine Teaching

The official Roman position since Trent regarding Scripture and tradition and the role of official interpretation by the church is well illustrated by a diagram from Kurt Marquart.⁶ Rome visualized Scriptures as the authoritative and inerrant word of God; and it viewed tradition as another form of revelation gradually added to the body of truth. "In the Roman scheme, Scripture is not directly available as source and norm of truth. It must first be completed by tradition."⁷ Besides tradition, the teaching church, or magisterium, headed by the papacy must "filter" this body of revelation:



We, the sacred Council approving, teach and so define as dogma divinely revealed that the Roman pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*—that is to say, when in the discharge of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith and morals to be held by the universal church—is, through the divine assistance promised to the blessed Peter himself, possessed of the infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that His Church should be endowed for defining doctrine concerning faith and morals; and that therefore such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves, and not from the consent of the church, unalterable.⁸

Higher Criticism

Since World War II the Catholic Church has increasingly taken a higher critical approach to Scripture, which in Latin America is perhaps most evident in the explanatory material provided in two widely used Catholic translations, **La Biblia de Jerusalén** and **La Biblia Latinoamérica**.⁹ Thus, the recently published **Catechism of the Catholic Church** considers the New Testament itself a form of tradition:

The Tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus' teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit. The first generation of

⁶ Kurt Marquart, "Let's Ask Scripture And Tradition About Scripture and Tradition," **Christian News Encyclopedia**, Vol. II, Missouri Publishing Company, Washington, Mo., 1983, p. 1510. (Other quotations from Marquart are from the same article.)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ **Dogmatic Constitution, Vatican Council**, 1870. Quoted by Marquart, op. cit.

⁹ These translations have been reviewed by Philip Strackbein in **El Mensajero Luterano**, El Paso, TX, 13:6, 14:1. See also "Rome Endorses Higher Criticism," **Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly**, 92:1, pp. 61-2.

Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition.¹⁰

It should not be surprising therefore that the Roman Catholic acceptance of higher critical methods, which have reduced and limited Scriptural authority in Protestant circles, has tended to merge Scripture and tradition into one body of revelation (in spite of protestations to the contrary¹¹) which in turn is always subject to reinterpretation.

This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the *understanding of the realities and the worth, which have been handed down*. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure things in their hearts (cf Lk. 2:19,51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For, as the centuries succeed one another, *the Church constantly moves forward* toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach *their complete fulfillment in her*.¹²

Even long before Vatican II the Catholic Church, based on tradition, could establish dogmas, such as the immaculate conception of Mary and her bodily assumption, which clearly go beyond what the Scriptures teach about Mary.

Magisterium

Since one cannot be certain what in Scripture is God's revealed truth and since, consequently, millions of Catholics could develop manifold traditions all claiming to have received divine truth, who decides what is true doctrine? The liberal Protestant answer is theological and hermeneutical expertise. The Catholic answer is the magisterium:

The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him.¹³

While the council goes on to say that "this teaching office is not above the word of God," it is hard to see how that is possible. As Marquart wrote,

Since the Pope is the ultimate and authoritative interpreter of both Scripture and Tradition, it is clear that the latter are really no authorities at all, since they can only mean what the Pope says they mean. He, then, not they, is the only real authority. A rule that must be ruled by another rule is, to that extent, not a rule.¹⁴

Greater Emphasis on the Bible

We might think that since the Roman Catholic church at Trent formally rejected the Lutheran position of *sola scriptura*, and since it has deviated so far from Scripture in so many doctrinal areas, and since in the middle

¹⁰ Interdicasterial Commission, Liguori, MO, 1994, # 83.

¹¹ Ibid., #78.

¹² Walter M. Abbott, S.J., General Editor, **The Documents of Vatican II**, Guild Press, New York, 1966, p. 116.

¹³ Interdicasterial Commission, op. cit., #100.

¹⁴ Marquart, op. cit., p. 1510.

ages it even forbade the possession of books of the Bible by laity,¹⁵ the Bible would be largely ignored by the Roman church. Not so. The Bible is quoted frequently in the Vatican II documents and also in its Catechism, which has an index of scriptural citations numbering more than 30 pages. The Dogmatic Constitution encourages Bible study by the clergy:

The Church is concerned to move ahead daily toward a deeper understanding of the sacred Scriptures so that she may unceasingly feed her sons with the divine words....Catholic exegetes then and other students of sacred theology, working diligently together and using appropriate means, should devote their energies, under the watchful care of the sacred teaching office of the Church, to an exploration and exposition of the divine writings....This sacred Synod encourages the sons of the Church who are biblical scholars to continue energetically with the work they have so well begun, with a constant renewal of vigor.¹⁶

The Vatican council also encouraged the laity to use the Scriptures by calling for their increased use in worship, encouraging translations, favoring Bible instruction for the laity, and stimulating devotional use of the same. Bible societies to distribute Scriptures to non-Christians are also encouraged. But the magisterium is not forgotten.

It devolves on sacred bishops, "who have the apostolic teaching," to give the faithful entrusted to them suitable instruction in the right use of the divine books, especially the New Testament and above all the Gospels, through translations of the sacred texts. *Such versions are to be provided with necessary and fully adequate explanations* so that the sons of the Church can safely and profitably grow familiar with the sacred Scriptures.¹⁷

Impact in Latin America

While the Roman Catholic Church has clearly accepted modern Protestant higher critical methodology and by that has seen its regard for Scriptural truth decline even further, it is gratifying to observe its greater use of the Scriptures. How different this is from evangelism conducted by Franciscan and Dominican monks during the sixteen century in Mexico when the emphasis was almost entirely on the administration of sacraments and catechetical instruction.

By contrast today in Mexico there are Catholic Bible institutes. The Catholic charismatic movement is emphatically in favor of Bible study. During survey work done in Juarez in 1987 we found that only three of 158 Catholics interviewed said that only priests should read the Bible.

Nevertheless, the fruits of the past lack of Bible use are evident (though we make no claims that nominal American Protestants are more familiar with the Bible). A survey by **El Norte**, a newspaper in Monterrey, revealed a general lack of Bible knowledge.¹⁸ Fewer than half the Catholics interviewed knew Jesus' age when as a boy he talked with the priests in Jerusalem. Similarly fewer than half knew the names of the four Gospels. More than a third did not know the place of Jesus' birth, the composer of the Lord's Prayer, the number of days in which the world was created, the occasion for the first celebration of Holy Communion, or the identity of Jesus' first miracle.

Another fruit of Rome's confusion of Scripture with tradition is a marked orientation by people toward a subjective and at times mystical interpretation of events. A Hispanic member of one WELS congregation in El Paso said that when her pastor visited her for the first time, she saw a kind of glow around his head. And why

¹⁵ Wilbert Gawrisch, **WLQ**, "The Bible in Current Catholic Theology," 66:3, p. 179.

¹⁶ Abbot, op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 128.

¹⁸ This material appeared in **El Norte** in a series of eight articles entitled "Desputa por la Fe" during the week of March 28—April 4, 1987).

not? Her Roman Catholic heritage has taught for centuries that God can be known through mystical contemplation, that the Virgin Mary has granted special revelations of her presence, and that God continually guides the magisterium of the church to perceive new doctrinal and moral truth. One can quickly sense a similarity between Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism in the area of revelation. And one is not a bit surprised that mainline Protestants incline toward reunion with Rome. All interpret the Scriptures subjectively. An apparent difference among these groups is that the Catholic Church seeks to maintain control over subjective interpretation via the magisterium. Thus the charismatic movement in Mexico recognizes that its revelations and guidance received directly from the Holy Spirit must conform to Catholic doctrine.¹⁹

Part II: Mariolatry

The development of dogma relating to the Virgin Mary illustrates how important tradition is in the Roman church. More than once the Documents of Vatican II said, "We now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁰ However, the church does recognize private appearances by the Virgin Mary. And her purported manifestation and subsequent adoration by the common folk in Latin America show how far the Catholic Church is willing to bend to establish new teaching without adequate Scriptural basis.

Official Catholic Teaching Concerning the Virgin Mary

Vatican II stresses that the magisterium does not confuse Mary with the Trinity. "[The cult of Mary] differs essentially from the cult of adoration which is offered to the Incarnate Word, as well as to the Father and Holy Spirit."²¹ Nonetheless, the council lists her appearances in the Bible so as to assign her a causative role for the redemption of mankind, since she is seen as "under *and with him* [emphasis added] serving the mystery of redemption."²² Therefore, consistent with its handling of Scripture, the Catholic Church sees in these repeated appearances a special role and station implied for Mary.

This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation....Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.²³

Yet the Roman Catholic Church seeks to safeguard Christ's role as the one mediator: "[The above titles] neither take away from nor add anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator."²⁴ The Catechism, quoting the same Vatican II documents, attempts to maintain the same distinction: "This very special devotion...differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and greatly fosters this adoration."²⁵

¹⁹ Salvador Carrillo Alday, M.Sp.S., **Renovación Cristiana en el Espíritu Santo**, Octava Edición, Instituto de Sagrada Escritura, Mexico, 1982, p. 132.

²⁰ Abbott, op. cit., pp. 50, 113.

²¹ Ibid., p. 94.

²² Austin Flaky, O.P., Gen. Editor, **Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Vol. I**, Costello Publishing Company, Newport, New York, 1988, p. 418.

²³ **Lumen Gentium**, 62, as quoted by Interdicasterial Commission, op. cit., #969.

²⁴ Abbott, op. cit., p. 92.

²⁵ **Lumen Gentium**, 66, as quoted by Interdicasterial Commission, op. cit., #971.

Importance of the Virgin Mary in Latin America

While Luther was challenging papal authority and would soon enter debate at Leipzig, Hernán Cortés was sailing to Mexico, where he unfurled his flag in the name of the Spanish Monarch. There he constructed an altar on which he placed an image of the Virgin Mary and spoke warmly about the goodness and power of the Mother of God.²⁶ A Spanish Catholic, whose greatest king, Alfonso X, at the apex of the medieval period 250 years earlier wrote over 400 *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, could do no else. From the beginning the Franciscan and Dominican monks that followed Cortes also encouraged veneration of the Virgin Mary.²⁷ During the same century of the conquest famous sanctuaries were built where the Virgin was venerated through the help of sacred images to which many miracles have been attributed.

The most important sanctuary in Mexico is the Basilica de Guadalupe. The impressive modern church, which replaces a series of sanctuaries that date from the sixteenth century, is built on the site, called Tepeyac, where the Virgin is said to have appeared from December 6 to 12, 1531, to a simple Indian shepherd named Juan Diego. This is the only place in Latin America where Mary is supposed to have actually revealed her presence.²⁸ The other sanctuaries have sacred images made by the faithful, but the Basilica de Guadalupe purports to have a portrait of Mary which she herself miraculously formed from roses on Juan Diego's cloak.

The importance of the Virgin Mary and especially her appearance at Tepeyac for the conversion of Mexico²⁹ is readily apparent when one recalls that the Indian civilization, with its bloody sacrifices, huge and numerous temples, and its gods and countless priests, was avidly religious. The veneration of Mary clearly appealed to a need for visible gods. The name by which she was to be identified, *Santa María Virgen de Guadalupe*, may also imply something about the switch from pagan idolatry to mariolatry, since Guadalupe may have come from an Aztec word, *cuatlalupej*, meaning the conqueror of the serpent.³⁰ What is more, the image on the shepherd's cloak is of a brown skinned Mary,³¹ the significance of which was explained by a bishop in Mexico at the 400th anniversary of Mary's appearance.

When the Mother of God with her immaculate hands put the fragrant roses into the Indian's rough cloak, she forged the soul of our fatherland and of our race; and in that immortal soul she tenderly deposited her motherly heart. Nothing, no one can ever tear from our soul this divine treasure, just as no one could ever separate what the hands of Mary united; the cloak is the symbol of our race, and her image is the emblem of her partiality.³²

The national identity with the Virgin Mary is evident everywhere. Her image has appeared on flags during the struggle for independence and the ensuing civil wars. She has been officially designated as the patroness of Mexico, and indeed, of all Latin America. When Pope John Paul II traveled to Mexico in 1979, one of his first destinations was the Basilica of Guadalupe, not only because of his own veneration of Mary but also because of her importance to Mexico. In Guadalajara he quoted a well-known saying that Mexico is 96% Catholic, but 100% Guadalupano.³³

This national identity with the Virgin Mary, which is intertwined with history, culture, and even racial identity, is something which distinguishes Mexican Roman Catholicism from its Anglo-Saxon counterpart.

²⁶ Joaquin Antonio Peñalosa, *La Práctica Religiosa en México, Siglo XVI*, Editorial Jus, Mexico, 1969, p. 206.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-209.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²⁹ Pope John Paul II called her "Estrella de la evangelización" in his address to the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Puebla (Francisco J. Perea, *El Papa en México*, Editorial Diana, Mexico, 1979, p. 148.)

³⁰ *Catechismo Sintetico Guadalupano*, p. 17.

³¹ "La Morenita," Perea, op. cit., p. 76.

³² Pompa y Pompa, *El Gran Acontecimiento Guadalupano*, Editorial Jus, Mexico, 1967, p. 150.

³³ Perea, op. cit., p. 199.

When the Holy See declared Mary to be the patroness of Latin America in 1910, the United States was not included because the American church was opposed.³⁴

Syncretism

The emphasis on the Virgin Mary, promoted by the church from the very beginning, raises the issue of syncretism. While the Catholic church has gone far beyond what confessional Lutherans could tolerate, nevertheless the pope has addressed this concern saying that faithful priests should take pastoral advantage of popular devotion to the Virgin Mary to lead those who are less than faithful to a fuller understanding and commitment to Trinitarian and Christ-centered faith. "Let Mary be the way."³⁵

Mariolatry is not the only evidence of syncretism. The eight to ten million Indians distributed among some fifty tribes, of which some four and one-half million still speak native languages, still follow many ancient Indian beliefs and practices.³⁶ On one extreme the Huicholes in southwestern Mexico still worship ancient gods called Our Grandfather Fire, Our Grandfather Sun, Our Mother Earth, Our Aunts (the goddesses of rain and the sea), and Our Brothers (the gods of corn and peyote).³⁷ On the other end of the scale are the Nahuas and Huastecos who live in much more centrally located areas and have been in far more contact with the Roman church. Their religion is primarily Catholic. But even these groups retain ancient beliefs and practices in Catholic garb. For example:

The Christs and saints are supernatural and of great relevance, among which the patron saint of each locality stands out, and to which the people go with their problems and for whom they dedicate an annual celebration. Not only do the saints help, they can also punish those who do not render expected worship. Pilgrimages are important, especially for those who live in the center of Mexico, since they go to various sanctuaries such as that of the Virgin of Guadalupe...to obtain or give thanks for favors, to be cured of infirmities or to obtain good harvests.³⁸

There are also gods and goddesses that are not identified with saints.

Those missionaries who have worked in the Caribbean are familiar with a similar form of syncretism associated with Santería where San Lázaro became identified with the African god Babalú-ayé, and Santa Bárbara with Changó.³⁹ Syncretistic elements show up in various churches in the Andes. On the altar of Santo Domingo in Tunja, Colombia, the head of God is depicted as the sun; La Iglesia de la Compañía in Arequipa, Peru, is decorated with images of the sun and moon.⁴⁰

The typical Mexican-American in the southwestern United States is far more likely to be mestizo than native-American, not only because the vast majority of the population is so, but also because, as a survey conducted by the Mexican government has shown, the typical emigrant to our country comes from the northern desert area of Mexico, where very few native-Americans live.⁴¹ Nevertheless, religious customs and attitudes,

³⁴ Pompa y Pompa, op. cit., p. 89.

³⁵ Perea, op. cit., p. 222.

³⁶ Alan Riding, **Vecinos Distantes**, Planeta, México, 1985, p. 241.

³⁷ Lilian Scheffler, **Grupos Indígenas de México**, Panorama Editorial, Mexico, 1986, pp. 150- 151.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 159.

³⁹ Chang-Rodriguez, op. cit., p. 383. Jesús J. Barquet, a specialist in Hispanic literature in the United States and currently a professor at the University of New Mexico at Las Cruces, reports that spiritualism is currently as common among whites as blacks in Cuba where Catholicism was devastated by communism and spiritualism (espiritismo, santería, brujería, botánicas) has flourished in recent decades as an unorganized underground religion.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 328.

⁴¹ Riding, op. cit., pp. 393, 394.

including religious dances that date to the pre-Colombian area, still have some impact on Roman Catholicism in the southwest.⁴²

Part III: Church and Ministry

Few would challenge Pope John Paul's statement that Mexico is nominally 96% Catholic. We've already seen that due to syncretism and a failure to reach all segments of society the knowledge of Roman Catholic doctrine can vary greatly. But what does the church mean in Mexico and Latin America generally? We could easily dissuade ourselves from doing any evangelism work if we do not understand church in its cultural context. We could also make false assumptions about Latin Americans when they do participate in our congregations unless we understand the Catholic concept of ministry and its impact on church life.

Official Roman Catholic Teaching about the Church

The Roman church, of course, has never accepted Luther's argument that the holy Christian church cannot be identified with an outward institution, specifically the one over which the Roman pontiff presides. In its "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" Catholicism still seems to portray itself as The Church.

Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her could not be saved. They are fully incorporated into the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept her entire system and all means of salvation given to her, and through union with her visible structure are joined to Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops.⁴³

Notice the qualification about knowingly rejecting the Catholic Church. Clearly the council was not saying that faithful members of other Christian denominations were condemned because they were not Roman Catholics. The Decree on Ecumenism adds, "It is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained."⁴⁴ On that basis one would conclude that the Roman church still thinks of itself as the one true church.⁴⁵

But the same documents, echoed in the Catechism, show a clear ecumenical bent. They speak of "churches" outside Catholicism that belong to Christ:

The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter. For there are many who honor sacred Scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and of action, and who show a true religious zeal. They lovingly believe....They are consecrated by baptism....They also recognize and receive other sacraments within their own churches or ecclesiastical communities....They also share with us in prayer and other spiritual benefits.

Likewise, we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit....In all of Christ's disciples the Spirit arouses the desire to be peacefully united in the manner deter-

⁴² To help distinguish between syncretism and contextualization see "The Theology of Contextualization," **WLQ** (76:4, pp. 306-314) Cf. also "An Evaluation of Current Missiology" (79:3, pp. 182-184). Cf. also Dr. E. R. Wendland's course, "Christ Across Cultures," and Dr. William B. Kessel's course, "Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective," both offered at the WELS Board for World Missions School of Missiology in the summer of 1993.

⁴³ Abbott, *op. cit.*, pp. 32, 33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 346. v

⁴⁵ Cf. "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and its Ministry," **WLQ**, 79:2, p. 108.

mined by Christ, as one flock under one shepherd....Mother Church never ceases to pray, hope, and work that they may gain this blessing.⁴⁶

The Decree on Ecumenism says much the same thing. What is more the decree goes on to encourage ecumenical dialog, prayer, and collaboration as well as other remedies.⁴⁷

So what does this all mean? Thirty years ago some were asking whether the Church of Rome was trying to pave the way for Protestant churches to reunite with her or whether she favored a live-and-let-live relationship in which all churches were to dialog and instruct each other so that in some distant day they would all come to one accord in doctrine and practice. While the Catholic Church has become more clearly ecumenical since the days of Vatican II, her practice still seems ambiguous in Latin America.

In Mexico: Some Expressions of Fear and Resentment

Since Mexico has been almost totally Roman Catholic since the arrival of Cortés and the Franciscans, ecumenism seems a non-issue. But times are changing. The previously mentioned series in a Monterrey newspaper reported that in 1910 less than 1.5% of the population was not Catholic. The 1980 census put the percentage at 3.6 or about 2.7 million people. A historian interviewed by the paper suggested that the non-Catholic percentage was "surely higher." Perhaps 10-15% of the population in southeastern Mexico and the impoverished suburbs of Mexico City and 7-8% along the northern frontier were no longer Catholic.

Since the Catholic church faces a growing number of non-Catholics, its officially more open attitude toward Protestant churches is being tested. The results have been mixed. Anti-Protestant books and tracts, printed within the last decade, warn against Protestantism and teach that "only the Roman Church is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church."⁴⁸ "They're buying souls from the Catholic faith with their dollars"⁴⁹ is the headline of an article in **El Norte** about the growth of non-Catholic churches in Monterrey. The charge is not uncommon. A closely related concern is that if Mexico becomes less Catholic it will also become a weaker nation since one of its strong unifying factors has been its Catholic faith. "Religious sects try to divide us," the bishop of Juarez claimed in a front page story of **El Fronterizo**.

On the other hand there is a certain amount of ecumenical openness in Mexican Catholicism. The bishop of Monterrey in the same article, mentioned above, recognized that in distinction from certain aggressive sects, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, "there are some who are respectful, born from Christianity, that accept Christ as God and Man, that esteem the Word of God and accept others as their brothers, no matter what their religion may be." A child's catechism in preparation for first communion answers the question about whether "separated brethren" can be saved:

Yes; all "separated brethren" who are found in good faith, that is to say who sincerely seek Christ and try to follow his teachings, although they have not yet arrived to the fullness of the Truth and full communion with the representatives of Christ, that are the Pope and the Bishops, can be saved.⁵⁰

It appears therefore that the position of the Roman Church in Mexico toward Protestant churches might be summarized as: "While we do not deny salvation to those who are not in full communion with the Catholic

⁴⁶ Abbott, op. cit., pp. 33, 34.

⁴⁷ As with so many other issues, a concise and current description of the Roman position is available in its new Catechism, Interdicasterial Commission, op. cit., #813-822.

⁴⁸ Conversiones Notables del Siglo XX, **Sociedad E.V.C.**, D.F., 3° edición, 1977, front cover.

⁴⁹ "Nos están quitando la fe con dólares"

⁵⁰ **Catecismo Popular de Primera Comunión**, p. 36.

Church, we would like Protestants to keep out of our territory. Leave Mexico to the Church headed by the magisterium."

This in turn raises another question. Can confessional Lutherans, who have conscience strictures against proselytizing those who are under the care of other Christian shepherds, evangelize in Latin America? Before addressing that let's first consider the ministry in the Catholic Church, especially as it is understood in Latin America.

The Ministry According to Vatican II

We've already noted that the magisterium, that is the papacy and the bishops, has the sole authority to interpret written and oral tradition in the Catholic Church. This implies hierarchy; and that is exactly what Vatican II teaches. The pope is on top, next follow the bishops who under his leadership help to interpret and establish doctrine. Then come the priests who are to look upon their bishops as their fathers and reverently obey them. Under their direction the priests have power to "preach the gospel, shepherd the faithful, and celebrate divine worship....They exercise this sacred function of Christ most of all in the Eucharistic liturgy...[where they] re-present and apply in the Sacrifice of the Mass the one sacrifice of the New Testament....At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed 'not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.'" This latter office was reinvigorated by the council and is indicative of the church's efforts to involve more people in its service. Deacons can baptize, dispense the Eucharist, assist at marriages, read the Scriptures to the faithful, instruct, exhort, preside at worship and prayer, and officiate in funerals.⁵¹

Next come the laity. The constitution does encourage greater lay participation, and efforts in the last twenty years do evidence results, for example in the worship service now conducted in the vernacular. But it's also clear from the previously described clerical offices that there are things laymen cannot do. They have a different "status." They have a "secular quality." Though Vatican II, to increase lay participation and responsibility in the church, speaks of laymen as having a universal priesthood, it is evident that Rome does not accept the idea that "Christ instituted one office in his church, the ministry of the gospel, given to all believers individually and collectively [so that] the public ministry is not generically different from that of the common priesthood of all Christians [but] rather constitutes a special God-ordained way of practicing the one ministry of the church."⁵² Nor has Rome come to agree with Walther's thesis that "the ministry is not a special and holier estate apart from that of ordinary Christians," nor with the thesis that "the ministry of the Word is conferred by God through the congregation as the possessor of all ecclesiastical power, or the power of the keys," nor with the thesis that "the holy ministry of the Word is the authority conferred by God through the congregation, as the possessor of the priesthood and all church authority, to exercise the rights of the spiritual priesthood in public office on behalf of the congregation." The Vatican emphasis on the role of laymen pales in comparison to the freedom and responsibility described in the New Testament. The motivation from Rome to its laymen to accept responsibility can only be categorized as legalistic.

The Ministry in Mexico: Apathy

The underlying problem that the Catholic Church has in Mexico seems to be apathy. It is significant that the monastic missionaries complained of malaise and apathy already in the sixteenth century when the Indians of central Mexico were converted en masse. The Spaniards are depicted as supportive of the Church in theory but indifferent in practice. As intermarriage occurred and the mestizos became the dominant racial group, they

⁵¹ These references, as well as those from the subsequent paragraph are from Abbott, op. cit. Cf. also the new Catechism, Interdicasterial Commission, op. cit., #871ff.

⁵² Carl Lawrenz, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Its Ministry," *WLQ*, 79:2, p. 124. The following quotations are from the same article.

copied the example of the dominant class, the Spaniards.⁵³ The missionaries also had considerable difficulty in establishing local parishes during that century.⁵⁴

And that problem still exists. When we formulated the previously mentioned questionnaire for use in Juarez, the seminary students and pastor chuckled at the idea of asking people what church they belonged to. Church membership is truly a foreign concept in Mexico. The church is simply there. For convenience one could attend the local church, but he does not necessarily think of himself as a member of that church. Our organized Lutheran congregational activities from voters' assemblies to elders' committees, from constitutions to financial statements and pastoral reports stem from our belief in the universal priesthood. With freedom comes responsibility. Replace freedom with hierarchy and a sense of responsibility and ownership slides away. Consider the implications that a lack of ownership has on stewardship. Offerings are called alms⁵⁵ or are idealized as tithes.⁵⁶ The sense is that if one wants to be really holy, he should become a priest or a monastic, or maybe a charismatic; but the ordinary person will find that beyond his reach. Therefore, he is a Catholic; just as he is also Mexican and a Guadalupano; but often he does not seem to think of himself as part of the process, that the local parish is *his church*. The survey done by **El Norte** and our unscientific sampling in Juarez bear out these observations. Our pastors and members in Mexico are strongly of the opinion that for many the Catholic Church has little meaning in their daily lives. Legalism causes apathy.

So, if the Catholic Church says "don't proselytize," are we in fact doing just that, if we evangelize in Latin America? Our response is to decide if an individual is active in a parish. Is he in fact under the spiritual care of a shepherd, or only in theory? Furthermore we do not hesitate to share with anyone our hope in Jesus Christ. There are many with whom we can share the gospel without disturbing the relationship between a pastor and his sheep.

Part IV: Church and Society

Apathy became endemic during the last decade, at least in Mexico if not all of Latin America, in view of the severe economic decline in an area still mired in the third world. It is no secret that economic, social, and political turmoil have been building for years throughout Latin America.

Because the nearly 400 million people living south of the United States border represent nearly half of the entire Roman Catholic Church, their concerns must receive major attention. Since the wars for independence from Spain were won in the early nineteenth century the Catholic church's political and social clout, however, has been steadily curtailed. In Mexico, especially since the revolution in the second decade of this century, all organized religion saw its property appropriated by the government and its priests relegated to non-citizen status who could neither vote nor hold office. While the Catholic church before Benito Juarez dominated public and private life, secular government was in the saddle since the revolution that culminated in the Revolutionary Party's (PRI) virtually unbroken string of electoral victories for six decades.

Now the pendulum is swinging back as the government attempts to democratize, is denationalizing much of its industry, opening its borders to free trade, loosening strictures against organized religion, and legalizing the presence of foreign clergy and missionaries. So what should the Catholic church do? It has a time-honored tradition of seeking to influence public morality, and it has taken considerable pride in its historic concern for ordinary people. The Franciscans and Dominicans tried to protect the Indians from abuse by the Spanish conquistadors, for example; and the Jesuits were expelled from Mexico in the eighteenth century because they advocated education and human rights for Indians, mestizos, and criollos.⁵⁷ What is more, in theory the near unanimous majority of the population is a daughter of "Mother Church." Since the church has traditionally involved itself in the political process, at least by seeking basic human rights for the socially,

⁵³ Peñalosa, op. cit., pp. 232, 234.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 269.

⁵⁵ *Limnosas*.

⁵⁶ *Diezmos*.

⁵⁷ "La Nueva Conciencia de Mestizos y Criollos," **El Nacional**, Sept. 3, 1987, Sección Metropolitana, pp. 1, 2.

economically, and politically oppressed, its internal debate has centered on the choice of issues and the specific ways it should seek to effect change.

While the governments in Latin America are now trending away from communism toward free trade and free enterprise, Liberation Theology in recent decades became a prominent theological trend in Roman Catholicism and liberal Protestantism in much of Latin America, at least in the area of political and social issues.

The theological point of departure [of Liberation Theology] is not so much the Bible or the traditions of the Christian church as the terrifying social-economic misery in which so many Latin Americans are drowning. This subhuman misery is primarily due to the concentration of enormous fortunes in the bourgeoisie and indigenous state systems to benefit international capitalism. To overcome this situation, in general, by means of socialism, has become the primary mission of the church in Latin America, if not in the entire world, since to fail to do so would nullify the other spiritual treasures inherent in the Christian gospel for most of the people living in dreadful poverty due to social-economic policy imposed by capitalism.⁵⁸

The papacy, however, has resisted this trend, as illustrated by Pope John Paul II's response concerning Liberation Theology to the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) held in Puebla in 1979.

Today "re-readings" of the Gospel have become popular—though it's not a new phenomenon. The result is theoretical speculation rather than authentic meditation in the word of God and true evangelical commitment. They cause confusion by departing from the central criteria of the faith of the Church....

In some cases they either silence the divinity of Christ, or involve themselves in interpretations that dispute the faith of the Church. Christ would be only a "prophet," a messenger of the Kingdom and love of God, but not the true Son of God, nor would he accordingly be the center and object of the same evangelical message.

In other cases they attempt to portray Jesus as politically involved, as a struggler against the Roman domination and the establishment, even to be involved in class struggle. This idea of Christ as a political revolutionary, as a subversive from Nazareth, does not match the teaching of the Church. They confuse the insidious attacks of Jesus' accusers with his own very different attitude, so that they adduce as a cause of his death the denouement of a political conflict. The voluntary submission of Christ and even his redemptive mission are silenced. The Gospels clearly show how Jesus was tempted to change his mission as the Servant of the Lord (Mat. 4:8; Lk. 4:5). The position of those who mixed the things of God with merely political attitudes was not accepted (Mat. 22:21; Mark 12:17; John 18:36). The recurrence to violence was unequivocally rejected. He calls all to repentance, even the publicans. The perspective of his mission is much more profound. It consists of the full salvation by means of a transforming love, peace-making, of pardon and reconciliation. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that all this is very demanding for the attitude of the Christian that wants to minister the truth to his smallest brothers, the poor, the needy, the disenfranchised; in a word, to all those who reflect in their lives the suffering face of the Lord (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 8).

Against such readings therefore, and against the possibly brilliant, but fragile and inconsistent hypotheses that derive from them, "the present and future evangelization of Latin America" cannot cease to affirm the faith of the Church: Jesus Christ, Word and Son of God, made man to approach man and offer, by the strength of his mystery, salvation, the great gift of God.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Emmett Melia, "La teología de la liberación," *El Mensajero Luterano*, op. cit., 13:5, p. 9 (translated).

⁵⁹ Perea, op. cit., pp. 120-122.

While there does not appear to be any explicit reference to Liberation Theology in the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, the concern for equality and "social justice" is recognized. For example, quoting the documents of Vatican II the Catechism reiterates the church's long held condemnation of sinful inequities that are "in open contradiction to the Gospel":

Their equal dignity as persons demands that we strive for fairer and more humane conditions. Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace.⁶⁰

Mindful of the pope's visits to the United States and the considerable controversy surrounding his support for traditional Catholic positions on birth control, homosexuality, and sexual equality, the question naturally occurs whether there is a similar controversy south of the border. When 80% of the population is reported to go without meat, as just one measure of the widespread poverty in Mexico, one would hardly expect people to get excited about the kind of ethical questions that challenge the American Catholic Church. On the other hand, a young mother who was studying Scripture with her pastor in Guadalajara asked about birth control after attending a Catholic service in which the priest said that parents who practice artificial birth control cannot expect God's blessing in their marriage. Since younger parents generally have only two or three children, it's evident that artificial birth control is commonly practiced. Yet, when Catholics in Monterrey were asked whether their church should change its rules because they are outdated, 80% responded negatively. Very likely the comparatively small middle and upper classes, which in Mexico reflect American values, would share American Catholic concerns about their church.

Part V: Justification

We come, finally, to the central question about current Catholic belief and practice in Latin America. Do people confess that they are justified by grace alone because of the all-sufficient work of Christ? No. And how could one expect them to when the dominant church seems to spend little time even discussing justification?

Many think that Roman Catholicism is essentially different from the legalism so evident in Medieval Spanish literature and no longer follows its Tridentine condemnation of justification by faith. The documents of Vatican II suggest that, while legalism may have become more subtle, it is still present.

The documents speak about many contemporary issues, but they have precious little to say about the Christian liberty that, as Martin Luther described it, comes through faith in Christ. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, described as the primary document of Vatican II, issues "the call of the whole church to holiness,"⁶¹ but does not tell the world that it is justified because of the redemptive work of Christ. In one passage the call does say that the "followers of Christ...called...by grace...are justified in the Lord Jesus," and then spends paragraphs urging greater holiness saying, for example, that priests are "gifted with sacramental grace enabling them to exercise a perfect pastoral role of pastoral charity" to "lead the Church to ever-increasing holiness through their own example."⁶² Commenting on the Lutheran-Catholic Statement on Justification, John Brug explains:

Catholics can speak of justification by faith or even of justification by faith alone, insofar as they teach that nothing prior to the free gift of faith merits justification and that all of God's saving acts come through Christ alone. Catholics stress that the indwelling Spirit brings about in believers not only assent and trust, but also a loving commitment which issues in good

⁶⁰ Interdicasterial Commission, op. cit., #1938.

⁶¹ Abbott, op. cit., pp. 65-72.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 67, 68.

works....In the statement Catholics maintain that good works are a part of justification and not a result.⁶³

In the Catechism one clear example that the Catholic Church still views salvation as something obtained by the believer in cooperation with God is the teaching concerning the Sacrament of Penance. While a Christian has received the forgiveness of his sins in baptism, he nevertheless falls repeatedly into sin throughout his life. From these sins the Christian must also be converted. This "second conversion"⁶⁴ is obtained through faith and works.

Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one's brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one's cross each day and following Jesus is the surest way of penance.⁶⁵

During Pope John Paul II's first trip to Mexico he frequently spoke of the gospel while addressing his flock. But the gospel was not the life-giving message that God has reconciled the world through his Son; nor did he encourage his people to place their confidence in the blood and merits of Jesus Christ. Rather the gospel seemed to be the wonderful, holy life that God-fearing men and women can attain through divine assistance. He stressed his personal affection for his flock in Mexico and sought to stimulate obedience to Christ by that means. His addresses are filled with admonitions to be faithful, to work, share, give, help, teach. It should not surprise our Latin American missionaries that people frequently say, "God will repay you," upon receiving a favor. The pope said the same thing: "May (God) repay each one of you for what your actions merit."⁶⁶

It has been this writer's experience in Puerto Rico, Mexico, El Paso, and the university classroom that many Latin Americans do not understand justification by faith.

Conclusion

It is said that before the arrival of the Catholic monks the Aztecs used to greet their new-born children by saying, "You have come to suffer: suffer and die."⁶⁷ Sadly Latin Americans might say the same today. They have suffered a painful economic collapse. One family, which for a time was active in our congregation in Juarez, sold its home and business in Oaxaca to move north. They deposited their several thousand dollars into an account in Juarez, only to see the entire amount wiped out by inflation. That meant starting all over in the *colonias*, just as thousands of others are doing not only along the northern frontier but also in the large metropolitan areas like Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara. With suffering comes questioning, and Latin Americans are questioning their government as they have not done for generations. The previously cited newspaper in Monterrey said that Catholics were also looking for a church that gives meaning to their lives.

As the Latin American population rapidly grows in the United States, should the WELS not conclude that these also are a people that are looking for stability and purpose in their lives? The presence of many small, Protestant churches in El Paso, which is over 65% Hispanic, shows that these people are open to evangelism. When we have the one solace that changes sadness to joy, despair to hope, and doubt to confidence, how can we remain silent?

As we seek to share Christ in Latin America, perhaps the following theses drawn from our experience in Mexico may prove useful:

⁶³ *Northwestern Lutheran*, Feb. 1, 1984, p. 41.

⁶⁴ Interdicasterial Commission, op. cit., #1428.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, #1435.

⁶⁶ Perea, op. cit., p. 165.

⁶⁷ Peñalosa, op. cit., p. 18.

1. While we have attempted to generalize about contemporary Roman Catholicism in Latin America, we must not forget the great diversity that exists among Latin-Americans and their varied interpretations of Catholicism.
2. Latin Americans, especially in the lower and lower-middle classes, are likely to respect church authority, which can be carried over to a high view of Scripture. Though the Catholic Church has adopted modernist hermeneutics, this has not necessarily affected the average person's view of the Bible.
3. Latin Americans are likely to know little about the Scriptures. Although the Catholic Church has changed considerably by promoting the use of Scriptures, experience has shown that the typical person still has very little biblical knowledge.
4. Latin Americans are inclined toward mystical, subjective interpretations of life experiences and Scriptures. It is not a bit surprising that the charismatic movement and Pentecostalism are popular because the Roman Catholic Church has since the medieval era been strongly mystical and subjective. Secular literature has also recognized this inclination.
5. Latin Americans are likely to appreciate subjective, emotional worship rather than the opposite. The Roman Catholic Church achieves emotion through mystery and impressive services and ornate structures; their services do not parallel our confessional Lutheran services. While worship may not ignore a clear law-gospel distinction for the sake of satisfying people from a different cultural and religious heritage, our churches have generally preferred simple, informal worship services with simple, melodic music. Good work in this area has been done by Pastor and Mrs. Charles Flunker. The recently published Spanish hymnal of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has also been quite helpful.⁶⁸
6. While the veneration of Mary is especially prominent in Mexico, Latin Americans generally venerate her, and this is idolatry. We need to learn the vocabulary and tradition of mariolatry to understand Latin Americans. We need to be sensitive to the cultural and national implications that mariolatry may involve. We need to understand the official Roman Catholic teaching so that we deal effectively with their attempt to distinguish between veneration and idolatry.
7. Latin Americans may retain certain beliefs and customs which reflect ancient Indian beliefs, syncretized into Roman Catholicism in those regions where pre-Colombian Indian civilizations were important, and African beliefs, where slave-trade was common. We need to be sensitive to this to distinguish between pagan unbelief cloaked in Catholicism and adiaphora.
8. Latin Americans are far more likely to be unchurched than we might at first assume. We should not conclude that a given person is, in fact, active in a congregation simply because he identifies himself as a Catholic. He may be no more Catholic than a Scandinavian is Lutheran.
9. Latin Americans are not likely to understand or appreciate the universal priesthood of all believers. Therefore, they are not likely to understand the significance of congregational membership and its concomitant responsibilities. Rather than using complicated organizational structures that involve constitutions and committees, we are better served by organizing outreach around objectives and goals by which we seek to involve newly won disciples in specific activities that further the church's mission.
10. Latin Americans may be less concerned about equality of the sexes and other avant-garde social questions. But they may be more concerned about helping the poor. The Catholic Church has stressed the brotherhood of mankind and the need to practice charity and help the underprivileged. In this sense it will help us to study Liberation Theology so we may better apply our law and gospel preaching to the true needs and concerns of our listeners.
11. Latin Americans are not likely to know the gospel. They may be accustomed to certain Catholic definitions for terminology such as grace, faith, sacrament, confirmation, and saint, but these terms will require clarification to avoid confusion.

⁶⁸ ¡Cantad al Señor!, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1991.