

Why hasn't Catholicism had a more positive effect?

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 30, 2007 All Things Catholic

If any corner of the globe should bear the imprint of Catholic values, it's Latin America. Catholicism has enjoyed a spiritual monopoly in the region for more than 500 years, and today almost half the 1.1 billion Catholics alive are Latin Americans. Moreover, Latin Americans take religion seriously; surveys show that belief in God, spirits and demons, the afterlife, and final judgment is near-universal.

The sobering reality, however, is that these facts could actually support an "emperor has no clothes" accusation against the church. Latin America has been Catholic for five centuries, yet too often its societies are corrupt, violent, and underdeveloped. If Catholicism has had half a millennium to shape culture and this is the best it can do, one might be tempted to ask, is it really something to celebrate? Mounting defections to Pentecostalism only deepen such ambivalence.

After my recent jaunt in Honduras, I understand the question.

In this tiny country of seven million, violence is so endemic that even the guards at the Pizza Hut across the street from our hotel carried automatic weapons. According to the World Health Organization, Honduras has a murder rate five times the global average, largely due to the *maras*, or drug-related gangs. One sign of the times: Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa loaned us his driver and vehicle for some of my appointments, which meant that we moved with a military escort because of death threats against the cardinal, an outspoken opponent of the drug trade. (I confess that I sometimes wondered if we might actually be safer in a cab.)

Most of the estimated 30,000 young Hondurans who belong to these gangs, it's worth recalling, were baptized as Catholics and raised in Catholic families.

Corruption is also ubiquitous. To take one example, electrical blackouts are chronic because the state-run electric company is perpetually on the brink of bankruptcy. In a classic vicious circle, revenue shortfalls due to corruption have produced a staggering national "electricity tax" of 49 percent, prompting people to refuse to pay their bills, making breakdowns even more routine. Once again, the officials responsible for this mess are overwhelmingly Catholic.

In light of such realities, I repeatedly put the question to my hosts: Why haven't five centuries of Catholicism left a more impressive social fingerprint?

To my surprise, the response I anticipated -- that despite the best efforts of the church, Latin America is hostage to meddling from the United States, as well as neo-liberal economic systems -- wasn't at the top of the list.

To be sure, Hondurans understand the role that American interests, both political and commercial, have played in destabilizing their country. Honduras is the original "banana republic," where U.S.-based fruit companies long wielded more power than the government. In the early 20th century, U.S. Marines landed in Honduras no less than four times to protect the banana trade.

More recently, the United States played a huge role in Honduras during the 1980s, when the country formed a critical corridor between the *Contra* revolt against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and El Salvador's efforts to put down the Marxist FMLN. John Negroponete, today deputy secretary of state, cut his teeth as ambassador to Honduras, where critics say he turned a blind eye to human rights violations by the military, especially the infamous Battalion 316, thought to be responsible for thousands of "disappearances."

Post-Communist economic globalization has hardly been an unmixed blessing either. While CAFTA (the Central American Free Trade Agreement) is generating new wealth for Honduran elites, 80 percent of the country lives in poverty. Rodriguez believes that export economies won't work here, given that his country's principal products -- bananas, minerals and vegetable oil -- have been devastated by a collapse in international prices. Today, Rodriguez says, his country's real exports are "illegal immigrants and drugs."

Despite all this, most Hondurans seem determined not to blame outside forces for their struggles.

Fr. Ricardo Flores, pastor of San Jose Obrero parish in Tegucigalpa, told me that in his view, globalized economic systems and American policy "are not the big problems we face," and don't explain why Honduras is in crisis. He said the real issues are corruption, a lack of social solidarity, and inadequate investment in education -- all of which, he said, are basically home-grown.

Thus the original question: Why hasn't Catholicism had a more positive effect?

The most frequent explanation I heard boils down to this: For most of the 500 years since the arrival of Columbus, Catholicism in Latin America often has been skin-deep. People were baptized into the faith, married and buried in it, but for a variety of reasons there was precious little else.

To be sure, the church exercises considerable political clout. But that influence, many observers say, often masks a superficial Catholicism at the grass-roots.

At first blush, the claim that five centuries haven't afforded enough time for real evangelization might seem a terrible indictment. Honduran Catholics told me that, given its scarce resources, the church never stood a chance. Moreover, they say, baptismal counts notwithstanding, the region has never been ideologically homogenous.

For example, some Hondurans assert that during the Cold War, the dominant ideology was not Catholicism, but Marxism, which had a much greater impact in shaping the attitudes of political and social elites. That's the view at the new Catholic University of Honduras, founded in 1993 and named "Our Lady Queen of Peace" in honor of the reputed apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Medjugorje, in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

During my visit, rector Elio David Alvarenga Amador and members of his staff explained that the university was founded by lay Catholics who taught at the secular national university, and who were frustrated with what they saw as Marxist indoctrination, especially in education and the social sciences.

Vice-rector Virgilio Madrid Sol's, who keeps an image of St. Josemar'a Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, on his desk, though he's not a member, minces no words in describing the new university's mission: "To change Honduras."

Erika Flores de Boqu'n, another vice-rector, unpacked the point. She told the story of a recent engineering graduate who went to work for the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment, where he was asked to sign what Flores described as a falsified environmental impact study, presumably skewed by corruption. The engineer lost his job, but he made a stand for principle.

"Little by little, such acts will transform this country," Flores de Boqu'n said. "The church is starting this work only now."

Hondurans also point to a severe priest shortage as limiting the extent to which Catholicism took hold. With just over 400 priests, the ratio of priests to people in Honduras today is 1 to 13,000.

"At the time of independence from Spain, most of the Catholic clergy were expelled," Rodriguez said. "We had one bishop and 15 priests for the entire country."

That shortage left vast sections of the population with no regular access to the sacraments, and no meaningful catechesis. The few clergy on hand, mostly foreign missionaries, did their best, but dreams of Honduran Catholicism shaping culture in the sense that one associates with Poland under Communism, local Catholics say, was never in the cards.

Ruminating on these explanations, I'm reminded of the famous quip from G.K. Chesterton: The problem is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, but rather that it's been found difficult and never tried. Repeatedly, that's the story I was told by Hondurans. The problem is not that Catholicism has failed, but that authentic Catholicism has never been tried.

That view would appear to have been more or less endorsed by CELAM, the Conference of Bishops of Latin American and the Caribbean. In the *lineamenta* for their upcoming Fifth General Conference in Brazil, the bishops flagged inadequate religious formation, a mix of Catholicism and indigenous religious practices, and a lack of coherence with Catholic beliefs among the faithful, as central challenges.

Rodriguez, the first cardinal in Honduran history, emphatically believes that deep evangelization is a work still to be done, and thinks the church in Latin America is now developing the muscle to pull it off.

In that light, it will be especially interesting to watch the upcoming CELAM conference in early May in Brazil. Benedict XVI will be in attendance, and one imagines he too will be looking to see if Rodriguez's brother bishops share his confidence -- and, more importantly, what ideas they have to make it a reality.

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