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Colonial past no longer a prologue as South America blazes new trails

by Michael J. Gillgannon

Perspective

"I'm clinging to Christ. ... Thank you, my God. ... Thank you, my beloved nation."

These were among the last words sent to the people of Venezuela by President Hugo Chávez before his death March 5. He sent them in a tweet, expressing a popular piety that belies the American media caricatures, which persisted despite his serving nearly 15 years in office and winning three consecutive elections.

Rafael Correa, elected Feb. 17 for his third term as president of Ecuador with 56 percent of the vote, is a practicing Catholic. He is self-described as "left-wing -- not from the Marxist left but rather a Catholic left." Correa was a national leader of Catholic university groups in his student days and he worked a year as a lay missionary serving the poor with the Salesian fathers in the jungles of his homeland. Then he went on to get a master's degree from Louvain University in Belgium and a doctorate in economics from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Evo Morales won his second five-year term as president of Bolivia with 64 percent of the vote in 2009. He unofficially launched his re-election campaign last month for the 2014 presidential race, even though it is unclear if the constitution allows him to seek a third term. He is a baptized Catholic with a faith that syncretizes Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the *Pachamama* (Mother Nature) of the Bolivian people.

Chávez's handpicked successor, Nicolás Maduro, who was Venezuela's vice president and then interim president, will stand for election Sunday against Henrique Capriles Radonski, a state governor who lost to Chávez in the presidential election in October 2012.

South America continues to blaze new trails for free and fair elections as well as for the messy, mixed political applications of the social teachings of the Catholic church.

Recent demographic studies from Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate and by the Pew Research Center show rapid Latino growth in the United States while noting the decline of the church in all Latin American countries, causing much ecclesial confusion.

Still, with all its human limitations, the church is groping its way to adjust. This is not the case with U.S. policies, focused on free-trade agreements, terrorists and drugs. The second Obama administration, with a new State Department secretary, is in need of rebooting its default policy settings for Pan-American relations.

The new presidents of Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela -- all major oil and gas exporters -- will be in office at least through 2014. In recent years, each country has expelled the U.S. ambassador for interfering in its internal affairs. Ecuador accepted a new ambassador last year and Bolivia and Venezuela have expressed interest in re-establishing diplomatic ties.

These countries have shown high growth rates, each exceeding 4 percent in the last three years. All have made incredible statistical gains, lowering poverty rates and infant and maternal mortality rates while increasing accessible education to millions from preschool to postgraduate studies.

Will the still-new Secretary of State John Kerry and his team see what deterioration of diplomatic relations has done? Will they understand relations cannot be renewed without a serious change in the arrogant attitudes of U.S. policymakers?

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U.S. slogans have evolved, seguing from the Cold War on the "Marxists," to the "War on Drugs," and now to the "War on Terrorism." However, U.S. national security state policies appear consistent, only seeing paranoid plots in Latin American friendly nations. Nations that simply say they are free sovereign states, making their own policies on economic and trade matters, should not necessarily be viewed with alarm.

And what epochal changes will we see with our first Latin American pope, Francis?

A new era is dawning for the Americas. The colonial past -- both for church and state -- is no longer prologue. European and U.S. systems of colonial, economic or political control of the social and cultural effervescence of 600 million Latinos and native peoples will not serve the future well. Such practices simply will not function.

Historic class and race prejudices continue in Latin American countries and go unquestioned in the media, which seeks out the "power people," interviewing only university intellectuals and business and financial executives to provide interpretation and commentary. With precious few exceptions, for decades now the media has only looked for and told one side of a fascinating story of historic change that continues to take place in Latin America.

No one knows better than missionaries who have lived, worked and walked with the poor and the marginalized from the time of the Latin American military dictators until now how bad a job the media does.

The stigma of class-cloned media stereotypes -- "Chávez is a dictator and a clown" ... "Correa is a fiery foe of the United States" ... "Evo Morales is an unlettered Aymara socialist." -- does not help explain what is happening in South American nations. These loaded words and caricatures enter U.S. media channels unfiltered and misunderstood, misinforming the U.S. public. Meanwhile, virtually no one offers the context, the real backstory of six decades of enormous political, social and economic change in all the nation-states from Mexico southward.

Yes, these fledgling democracies have graft and patronage. Yes, the new international bonanza of minerals and resources gives these countries money they have not seen since the discovery of the silver and gold in Bolivia, Peru and Mexico in the 16th century. However, as they "redistribute" national wealth, given their past and present histories of injustice and inequality, they might be excused for their errors and excesses.

With their cultural and political changes, and given their new resource riches, all Latin American states must be included in an international debate about "nation-building" and "economic development with a human face."

What do words like *capitalism* and *socialism* mean in the 21st century? Do European and American government billion-dollar subsidies to monopoly food producers like ConAgra and Monsanto constitute socialism? Does a legal patent monopoly on the organic seeds of the world's food supply now define a free market? And what is the meaning of "free enterprise" in an era of banks "too big to fail"? Many questions seek answers, for which there seem to be few. These same puzzling issues, of course, await serious consideration and moral answers from the Catholic church.

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