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# Catholic Religion and Social Changes in Latin America and Caribe

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## Abstract

*The self-referential attitude of the Church, expressing itself through concepts by revelation, in dogmatic positions based on the super-evaluation of the institutional and authoritative dimension and in the church-centrism, is brought into question by the new cultural moment and by the new inter-relationality paradigm. This text analyses the actual situation of the Church and points out all challenges proposed to the Catholic Church in Latin America.*

## Resumen

*La actitud auto-referencial de la Iglesia, que se hace visible en conceptos como revelación, en posturas dogmáticas basadas en la súper-valoración de la dimensión institucional y autoritativa y en el eclesiocentrismo, es puesta en cuestión por el nuevo momento cultural y el paradigma de la interrelacionalidad. El presente texto analiza la actual situación eclesial y apunta algunos desafíos que se proponen a la Iglesia Católica en América Latina.*

The cultural changes that we are living, drive the structural changes at all levels: political, economic, social, cultural and religious. Reference models of some years ago are in crisis and enable to satisfy any new requirements. We live in a time of instability, which becomes stronger in the field of politics and economics. The centrality of the economy reveals the fragility of the current political system, that being based on participatory democracy, can not guarantee indistinctively to everyone, the fundamental rights. The market economy, based on "the calculation of utility," fails to satisfy the greed of a market that reveals all its indifference in relation to social, material and ecological matters. These elements, combined

with others, generate a deep crisis of the development model, dependent on the capital and on the market. In the social field, the great waves of immigration of recent years, from the south to the north of the world and from the east to west, are reshaping the global social environment. The contact, not always peaceful between different cultures, creates problems of social instability that can engender attitudes of intolerance and ethnocentrism, as well as bring to life interesting experiences of meeting and openness. If, on one side, the economic globalization sees positively this openness to pluralism and multiculturalism, as instruments of economic expansion, on the other hand, there are cultures and peoples, especially indigenous, natives and Africans that resist with all their forces to the cultural and economic homogenization that would lead them to disappear or be reduced to mere cultural folklore. In the same context we must place the crisis of religion, especially the classic and more institutionalized ones, while the new religious groups, widely spread throughout Central and Latin America, seem to live a moment of great expansion. It should be them, according to the opinion of some experts of religion, the best interpreters of religion in today's new socio-cultural context, referring to their view of religion.

In this paper, we will try to place some issues mostly concerning the Catholic Church, trying to indicate, at the end, some specific challenges.

## **New Paradigms**

Beyond the items mentioned in the introduction, what is happening, in the opinion of many, it's a paradigm shift whose consequences are quite profound. The paradigm of modernity supported science and was legitimized in the philosophical thought, had its rationale in the subject-object dualism and ended by emphasizing the former over the latter. The subject, from his ability to think, learn and formulate, becomes the reference point of all. Thus, the thinking subject and his reason became the decisive impulse of the scientific progress and of the modern development system. Through reason and its scientific and technological production, everything could be objectified and transformed starting from the interests of the human subject. The philosophical reflection, oriented as well to the study of being, just putting its emphasis on it, giving legitimacy to such ideological paradigm, which asserts the superiority of the one over the other: in the field of science, as well as in that of the social, religious, cultural, relations, and so on. That kind of thinking is at the origin of the systems of domination such as patriarchy, eurocentrism and capitalism, to quote some ones. The emerging paradigm proposes another type of approach: from the bipolar dualistic system that preferred

one of the two elements to against the other, to a view where everything is related to everything: the interrelationality. The discovery of quantum physics where matter is energy, resulting from exchange, caused a revolution in science, in thought and in the various fields of social, political and cultural life. The overcoming the dualistic opposition: subject x object, leading, for example to understand that there is something (an object) outside or separated from the subject as something static that can be known, otherwise there is a vital link between the two, by which, we not only know each other, as we interact and this interaction is the beginning of a continuous transformation. The subject is not one to be defined once for all, but is constantly transforming itself: the result of its relationships. It is a statement of fundamental importance, leading to the reformulation of key concepts such as truth, identity, and the review of relations nowadays essential, for example, the relationship with others (be they individuals, peoples or nations), with nature and the cosmos.

### **The Catholic religion against those changes**

This new cultural situation challenges in a special way the Catholic Church, and some of its fundamental concepts and structures that need to be rethought and reformulated.

- One of the central aspects of Catholicism is its self-consciousness and self-understanding that is founded on key concepts such as "revelation" and "incarnation." Such formulations are too emphasized, can be compromised by inter-religious dialogue, arriving to an exclusive or partially inclusivist position. They are also related to Christology: excessive stress in the person of Jesus sets in a less important level the subversive message of the Kingdom. The message is replaced by the messenger.

The person of Jesus is important, fundamental, as the bridge, the road, while the Reign remains the ultimate goal. Furthermore, the centrality of Christology can produce a magical religion: it was not what Jesus expressed by his life and words.

Rethinking the fidelity to the Gospel means coming back to the centrality of God's plan, which coincides with what is commonly called the Kingdom of God.

- Related to the concept of revelation is the question of truth. The Catholic Church is very concerned about the truth, and maintains a very clear position on what it considers truth, as the logical consequence of the revelation of God and the incarnation of Jesus Christ. But the truth is conceived as something objective, the "deposit" received, to be preserved and passed: it is a set of beliefs and statements that define the Church's doctrinal body. For this is the function of the Magisterium, whose main task is the preservation, protection and transmission of the deposit. The

teaching function is characterized by some key dimensions: its divine origin, resulting in religious consecration of its members, the visible expression of the divine call, its apostolicity linking the unbroken line of bishops to the apostles, apostolic fidelity guarantee ; his infallibility, even if recognized only in certain cases, in which are expressed its conscience and authority. Dogmatic attitudes of the Church and its doctrinal intransigence are logical consequences of this restrictive conception of truth and authority. From the new relational paradigm, it is understood that there is no truth neither already existing nor created, but there is a collective and plural search for truth. That means more than talking about truth, we must consider several truths, as many as the people involved in the search, because each one has their own understanding. Taking as an example the glass, it is not defined by one of its facets, but by all. The truth is proposed, then as a path, a process that is never finished, there will always be the possibility of new contributions and new understandings.

- This concept of truth leads to an overestimation of the teaching function, which is characterized by hierarchy, institutionalization and self-referentiality. Its standing in the divine call, makes it a necessary and untouchable institution, and its essential reference to the sacred places gives it a position of superiority and separation in relation to the laity. Its hierarchical structure expresses the degree of proximity to the divine and responsibility in its role as intermediary. All that area of mystery and holiness of the Catholic hierarchy confers absolute and unquestionable power, because its origin is considered divine. It is here that the question of self-referentiality of the Magisterium originates, transforming the tradition of the Church and its doctrinal statements, mostly of the past, as a reference to the present and future, without considering that they also are result of social, political, historical and cultural processes. The doctrinal dogmatism is the logical consequence of this archaic conception of authority and doctrinal fixity and the monopoly of interpretation related only to the magisterium, is made with no possibility of internal questioning the Church itself, which falls under the dictatorship of fidelity doctrine and dogmatism, which are expressed by the concept of the infallibility of the hierarchy. In fact, nothing more than a self-referential truth. In that sense it is also understood its patriarchal structure, which favors only the access of men to power, damaging the other social categories such as women.

- Another problem with the Catholic Church is the question of the inculturation of the gospel and, therefore, the concept of mission. It is part of the constituent elements of the Church's mission "ad gentes", which expresses the universal attitude of Christianity. But the universal expansion became, in most cases, a real conquest or cultural imposition,

with all human problems, both social and cultural getting from the "evangelized" cultures. There is, to understand the mission a serious mistake: the conception of the gospel as something superior to the cultures, which is above, and that is good for everyone, without distinction. The gospel is considered as a metaphysical body of values, applicable equally to all peoples and cultures. Without denying the validity of the Gospel ethics, that position also forgets that the gospel is the result of a cultural process, and an expression of a historically and sociologically contextualized situation. So the gospel is also related to its time, its society and culture. To universalize it, it must be inculturated as: translated into the symbolic systems and the languages typical of cultures with which it comes into contact. To do that without obstacles, you have to put on an equal situation and discuss equally with other "gospels", expressions of other cultures and religions.

- The result of these medieval conceptions is a church closed in his temple, looking for its center, concentrated on internal issues rather than on dialogue with the world. Ecclesiocentrism prevalence is on a more dialogic, missionary, transforming and liberating model. Thus, the Church focuses on a sacramental pastoral and doctrinal, ritual where the function gets a central importance. The worship and the observance of ecclesiastical norms (for that is the canon law!) guarantee the faithful correct interpretation of the gospel and, ultimately, salvation. The world is always seen as something negative, you need transformation, and God is far from that reality, being put out of this world, considered unworthy of him. The sky is transformed into the reference to God, to which rising the incense smoke of religious celebrations, whose languages and symbols are no longer understood by the people, because they are not expressions of his life. Life, faith and celebration have no harmony between them, not being expressions of the same outlook on life, God and religion. The current closure of part of Latin-American church to the social question, the poor and the transformation of reality, can only be understood with the advance of ritualistic and sacramental model of the Church.

### **Challenges to the Catholic religion in LA and the Caribbean**

According to what said before, it seems that some challenges are urgently to the Catholic Church.

- Rethinking its identity and mission, from the centrality of the Word of God. In times of crisis back to the origins is always one of the elements that helps in the evaluation of the way. Listening to the word enables to reaffirm the centrality of Jesus' plan and to understand the social, cultural and historical elements, preventing from a greater trust in it. But it is not a simple method of reading the word: it is necessary to

start from the historical-critical method, not legitimizing history but being reference of a cultural construction of the text, and giving value to the immense contributions of biblical Latin-American hermeneutics. In particular the popular reading of the Bible that gets more easily than other methods, establishes the relationship between life, truth.

- The word has in itself the option for the poor, the impoverished, "subjects denied", the "excess mass" as privileged theological place in a continent scarred by a history of colonization and spoliation. The invitation to resume the mission made at the Conference of Aparecida, is an invitation to leave the temples, and internal problems to return to the streets, squares, where are the people, especially those that are suffering. The credibility of the Church depends on its prophetic ability and on his desire to be again leaven in society. A neutral church, committed to the excluded is not a true Church of Jesus Christ.

- The consequence of these choices lead to the centrality of communal look, to an inclusive attitude from the excluded, to the priority of the relational element of the institutional. In a society marked by great migrations, products of individualism and social exclusion the communal inclusive attitude may be interpreted as a prophetic element of the Church, expression of the project of Jesus of the shared bread. The possibility of inclusion in relational communities, will enable the emergence of new subjectivities and social and political projects that are truly alternative, because their subjects are different. The relational element is not opposed to the mass: the two are complementary. But the Church must avoid the temptation of mass not to keep as central the question of primary relationships.

- It is necessary a reflection to obtain a more inclusive understanding of the ministry, involving women and other categories of people so far excluded. This goes beyond the internal democratization of the Church: it means the overcoming of a patriarchal conception of authority, for the expression of power really understood as a service to all existing subjectivities. It also involves the assumption of the relationship as basic category that governs not only the institutional and power relations, but also relations from which depends the hermeneutical process of definition of truth, identity and mission of the Church itself.

- Finally, it is necessary a reflection on faith in different cultures, being more concerned with fidelity to the values rather than with history of the definitions and doctrinal formulations. Inculturation means recognizing that the Spirit becomes before the missionaries, and is expressed by an attitude of appreciation of difference and otherness, and being less concerned with ourselves. One of the great challenges of Christianity is to get over the fear of others (be they religious denominations, other

religions, other cultures or the world), distrust, superiority and attitude of confrontation, which are resolved in the attempt to reduce everyone to himself/herself. Simply going out from ourselves to meet the other is to follow Jesus's commandment, who invites to consider the other more important than yourself. The emphasis on relationship is the way to overcome the opposition! Thus, we believe, Christianity get out of its closure to open a pluralistic dialogue in and welcome diversity, difference, plurality.

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