LATIN AMERICAN

1. Brazil and the Future

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THE generalities of geography, or a shape on the map, do little to prepare you for a new land. After the timeless, torpid days of sea and sun, the gradual bulk of a strange continent seems a heroic gesture against the empty world of water. And the introduction to South America is a warning that you must forget what you expected to see. For the islands of Fernando de Noronha, two hundred miles still from the Brazilian coast, a penal settlement for political prisoners, stand hostile and apart, with their toppling peaks and deserted bays. This is what land can be like; first a geology, and then the fantastic thing within that man can make of it.

Brazil is the fourth largest country in the world. More than two thousand miles from north to south, as many from east to west, and with a coastline of four thousand five hundred, it sprawls, huge and unmanageable in mind. Absurd to begin to write of it in terms of ports of call: the half-day visit and the scheduled sights. Yet there is something to be seen, and much to imagine. Here, more than in any other Latin American land, the layers of history are immediately revealed. First the immense fact of it, prodigal and strange: vast enough and rich enough to absorb the succeeding waves of Portuguese conquerors, African slaves, immigrants from Germany, Italy, Japan. Today a population of fifty-three million can suggest a false record of the facts, for three-quarters of the people are crowded within a hundred miles of the coast, mainly in the south-east. Here are the colossal cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, skyscrapered and growing every hour. But behind lie the immeasurable miles of the *sertoes*, the empty lands of forest and shifting herds, and even from the sea the mysterious world beyond the cities is revealed as the hours and days pass, and trees and matted undergrowth come down to the shore, a hint of the permanent heart of Brazil.

But it is a heart that the head forgets. The fantastic natural wealth of Brazil has always encouraged quick returns: there

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is little attachment to the land. Or as a Brazilian writer (Hollandia) has explained: 'there is a desire for collecting the fruit without planting the tree'. The crop comes easily: sugar, cotton, coffee, oil, gold. It has been a constant temptation, from the days of the earliest Portuguese colonists, to turn from one used region to some other, from one exhausted market to another, for there has always been somewhere else, something new. The towns themselves reflect this restless, rootless way of life. Rio de Janeiro is a new city built out of exasperation with the old, and much of it is brash and pathetically anxious to be up-to-date. Sao Paulo is newer still, and amazes the visitor with the symmetrical horror of a monument to rapid wealth, all neon lights and monotonous white cliffs of office blocks and flats. It is a boom city *de luxe*.

There is, it is true, much excellent modern Brazilian architecture. The Ministry of Education building in Rio is a wholly successful example of contemporary design, matching a climate of constant sun with its sides of coloured glass and its colonnade of glazed tiles designed by Portinari. One thinks, too, of a house out of the city (built by an architect for his own use, and plainly influenced by Le Corbusier) which is built on concrete stilts, with all its front of glass, curved, open to the sun and to the sea below. Here one could admire, as in another modern apartment in the city itself, the extraordinary exuberance of cultured Brazilian life. The Raoul Dufy paintings, the Lurçat tapestries, the modern Italian glass; all blended with traditional (that is to say, Portuguese colonial) furniture, reminding one of Hepplewhite in its functional good taste.

And the talk was as sophisticated as its setting. The business-man and the architect, the journalist and the lady of fashion: they all spoke English and French without bother. They were at home with most that matters in European writing, painting, music. And one realised, among many other surprises, that Graham Greene has become the one living English author who has a universal reputation. In the Argentine, the impression was strengthened even more, and a party was scarcely complete without the eager interest in 'your great novelist'.

It may be that educated Latin American Catholics, critical

as they seem of the inherited ossification of ecclesiastical tradition, are particularly sensitive to the dilemmas that are Mr Greene's chosen themes. For the Church in Brazil is part of the fabric of things, and like most familiar inheritances is scarcely even seen as new and demanding. 'Your Graham Greene is dealing with *our* problems and they are never talked about by the priests: not as they *really* are.' It was disconcerting, for instance, to hear a group of highly educated Catholics support the growing agitation to legalise divorce in Brazil. The argument was that the existing situation, the frequency of 'other arrangements' when marriage failed, was hypocrital, a widespread betrayal of the sanctity of a sacrament, which was worse in its effects than would be the realism of divorce. Perhaps one of the greatest needs of the Church in Latin America is the fostering of priestly vocations that may hope to take account of the real needs of a changing world. Rio and Sao Paulo are no doubt febrile and artificial, but they exist and grow most frighteningly. And the Catholic influence in the field of opinion seems sadly weak. The want of priests is tragic throughout the whole continent, and, unless it be met soon and effectively, Catholic allegiance may be permanently left to the old and the ignorant.

In a town such as Salvador, capital of the state of Bahia, one sees at once what the first pattern was like. Here, in a coloured ladder of colonial houses, baroque churches of spectacular exuberance thrust their double towers to heaven with no apology. Within, as in the celebrated church of San Francisco, all is gold and grandeur: altars prodigal with caryatids and cornucopias assert the glad surprise of a Church transplanted into a rich land. The cloisters are covered with tiles of blue and white which recount the Senecan virtues, telling of fortitude and heroic death. But these are for Franciscan meditation. The public church is a song of joy and splendour to match the unfailing sun, the unimaginable wealth of the new land. In the streets are all the pigmentations of generations of easy alliance, from the deepest Negro to the near-white of the colonial. The Church was close to the heart of things, provided the colour and comfort that this strange medley of men had need of. And superstition is very near. All are baptised, but many remain with their

roots in ancient forests, dark and distant but—you are told—coming close at Carnival, when the drums beat for days and nights, and the dancing begins and *makumba* is more than the derived theme of the latest jive record.

It is idle to approach so mysterious a world so open as it seems, so hidden as it is, with the categories of Northern neat-and-tidiness. But it is a calamity to think of the Church as only a survival of a cultural order that is passing. It must meet the menacing world of the skyscrapers which is invading even the skyline of Salvador. And it must have something to say of the crazy economy of a country which knows extremes of wealth and destitution beyond Western imagination.

Brazil is a democracy, if democracy means freedom to criticise, freedom to strike. Its President, Getulio Vargas, was indeed for fifteen years a dictator on the South American model, but his régime fell in 1945, and he returned, three years ago, as the freely elected head of the United States of Brazil. The walls are covered with political maledictions, and the newspapers are enormous with tales of corruption and recrimination. The Sunday edition of the Rio *Diario de Noticias* has seventy-two pages, with eight supplements dealing with literature, the arts, sport, economic questions and simply news. And the news is revealing. Brazil is really a continent in itself; impulsive, unstable, rich yet destitute, American in much of its outward shape but a jungle within. It needs a marriage now between what it radically *is* and what its wayward economic history has made it become. That cannot be easy.

Brazil seems to have solved some problems which elsewhere are a growing cancer in national life. Racial discrimination is unknown, though Brazilians are readier to admit an Indian strain than a Negro one. It may be that mere necessity, or the indolent tolerance of Portuguese taste, has come to seem a virtue which other nations so sadly lack. In any case the mingling of colour means more than the solution of racial divisions; it suggests that there are other causes of conflict which the very size and diversity of Brazil can resolve as surely. And here the role of the Church is a radical one. Secure in her traditional function, she cannot

afford to rely on it. The future will see an intensification of the life of the city, perhaps too arbitrarily translated to the endless sun of a tropical land, the American accent unauthentic here. The simplicities of inherited piety, the wax *ex votos* and the gilded flowers, can seem nostalgically delightful but unequal to new strains, new responsibilities. The fostering of an adult awareness of what Christian life involves, in the face of the society in which men are in fact engaged, would seem to be in Brazil, as in the rest of Latin America, an imperative need. The more so in that the foreseeable future can hardly be expected to produce the priestly vocations that the situation demands.

At High Mass in the Benedictine church in Rio one heard the familiar chant of Western Christendom, gravely rendered among the baroque splendours of the seventeenth-century church. 'Of course', said the Brazilian lady, 'it's the only church in Brazil where anyone can really *pray*.' An exaggeration, and not perhaps a very wise one. But here was one sort of reconciliation; a tradition made true, so that there was no sort of incongruity between the setting and what was sung, however diverse their cultural roots might seem to be. That is a symbol of the Church's work in every age and in every place; to reaffirm the unity of truth, to make Christ contemporary.

Very soon, it may be, the full meaning of the Brazilian industrial revolution will be made clear. Despite vast natural riches, the economy of Brazil is a precarious one, and not even Eldorado itself can in the modern world be independent of world markets or unaffected by what is happening at the furthest ends of the earth. The dumping of millions of pounds of Brazilian coffee into the sea was the favourite example in the thirties of the lunacy of a world economy which was pegged to easy profits and had little regard for justice. The situation has altered now, and the vast army of Brazilian workers has achieved new power, even though as yet it be unaccompanied by much responsibility. In this situation an unambiguous stand for Christian social justice, at every level of national life (not excluding the corruption which seems endemic in South American politics), is an essential mark of the Church's apostolate. For if the history of

Western Europe be repeated, with its virtual loss of the working classes to the Church ('the scandal of the nineteenth century', as the popes have called it), the golden grandeur of Salvador will avail very little: the temples of later Incas that had their day, marks of a past irrecoverable now.

But there can be no Christian penetration of a society unless there be men and women trained to achieve it. There are many signs that Rome regards South America as crucial to the contemporary history of the Church; and secular and religious clergy alike are being increasingly reminded of their opportunity and are being helped in many ways to pursue it. But an integrated Catholic lay life, with its generous acceptance of what the Incarnation means at this moment, must be the indispensable condition of a new conquest, as enduring as that of the Portuguese long ago. The new conquest demands generosity, but here, as in so many other Latin American republics, the spiral of too recent and too rapid an industrial revolution has soared out of reach of the traditional pieties, casual and simple though they might have been. And yet there is a symbol—the immense Christ of Corcovado—which shows where the final reconciliation will be found. At night the statue, floodlit on its mountain behind the city of Rio, is inescapable, and as the ship sails down the incomparable harbour the outstretched arms seem to enclose the whole city. But at last the city itself is but a blur of light along the bays, and only the figure stands clear and identified above, unchanging, the point of reference for all change.

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