

This document¹ was composed by the Dominican friars who have been imprisoned in São Paulo since 1969. It is the outcome of their joint reflections and those of other Christian prisoners with them. It falls into three parts: a meditation on the role of the Church in the world (extensively summarized here), an account of conditions in Brazil, and a consequent justification of the revolutionary position they have adopted.

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I. THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

The Church is the universal sacrament of salvation, continuing in time the presence, mission and work of Christ in the world. Jesus Christ came to make salvation a reality, and his whole life, including his death and resurrection, was a witness of love. The mission of the Church is to continue this living witness of love, and the Church is essentially missionary, sent to the world to witness to Jesus Christ among men.

The Church cannot exist on the fringe of the world; it is in the world and has to be constantly present to the world, since it is there that its mission lies, as light to the world, salt of the earth, the leaven in the dough. This is why the Council produced a Constitution on the Church in the World of Today.

Love today is political or it is nothing

To carry out an effective witness to Christ in the world, the faith of the Church cannot be a mere intellectual adherence to the message: it must be a living witness, an inner dynamic giving shape to the actions of men, and this living witness and dynamic is that of love, the sign of being disciples of Christ (John 13: 34, 35). The Christian is seen in his love for his fellow men, seeing his brother Jesus in the face of each, and particularly in the poor and the oppressed. The Church is indissolubly bound up with mankind, and nothing is foreign to its concern. This is the basic message of *Gaudium et Spes*, and it means that the Church cannot remain aloof from the injustices that mankind is suffering today.

The Constitution tells us that both the Church and the political community, in their different ways, exist for the good of the individual and for that of society, the common good. This means that in the widest sense of the word, the Church is in politics. Not as supporter of any particular régime or party, but as a body that must identify itself with the legitimate aspirations of mankind, and see them through to their final achievement. In the old days, almsgiving was thought to discharge the Christian's duty to mankind, and this was the chief form charity took. With it went a

¹Translated and abridged by Paul Burns from the full text published in Spanish in *Marcha* (Uruguay), 4.9.70.

feeling that poverty was part of the natural order of things. Today we know that the roots of poverty are not natural, and almsgiving, which fails to attack the roots, is a mere palliative. Poverty is conditioned by particular socio-economic and political systems and structures, and charity cannot blink this fact. Today Christian charity will be seen in attempts to change these systems and structures. Love today is political or it is nothing; charity must have a social and political dimension.

So the Church must teach social values, point to the signs of grace in society today, and to the signs of sin. This must be done not only in words, but in action too. As the Latin American hierarchies declared at the Medellín Conference: 'It is clearly not enough to reflect, collect further evidence and talk. We have to act. The present hour has not ceased to be that of the word, but at the same time has, with dramatic urgency, become the hour for action.'

Does this mean that the Church's mission is a political one? The Church's mission is religious, but, as *Gaudium et Spes* points out (n. 42), the religious mission itself can produce benefits and insights that will contribute to the organization and strengthening of the human community in accordance with the law of God. The Church's presence among men, its compromise with men, is essential to its mission of evangelization. It cannot witness to the love of God without loving men, since we know that he who does not love his brother, whom he can see, is incapable of loving God, whom he cannot see (1. Jn. 4, 20). And to love men, the Church must know men in their reality, in their social, cultural, economic and political situations. The Church's task is to bring these situations into conformity with the message of Christ, to make human reality grow to the stature of Christ. In this sense the Church has to enter the political arena to carry out its mission of service to the common good. Its quest for the perfecting of man and the human community is a necessary consequence of its specific mission. The Church is at the service of man: this is the message of, and the reason for the existence of, documents such as *Populorum Progressio*, *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris*, *Gaudium et Spes*. It is also the message of Medellín.

The task of the Christian is to make the spirit of the Gospel penetrate the structures of the world, so as to create conditions in which men can develop as complete beings and live in justice, freedom and love. To do this he must be aware of the conditions in which men actually do live. He cannot be faithful to the Prince of Peace by ignoring the institutionalization of violence all around him. He cannot witness to the freedom of the children of God by forgetting the oppression under which so many of his brothers live. He cannot follow him who came to give witness to the Truth by turning a blind eye to the establishment of the Lie. In short,

he cannot follow Jesus Christ without loving his fellow men as Christ loved them.

God speaks through events; reveals himself in human history. So the Church has to be alert to history and events, has to read the 'signs of the times', interpret historical development in the spirit of the Gospel. 'Signs of the times' are those in particular that show human progress, and Christians have to be attentive to these if they are to deepen the presence of God in events. Attentive too to the signs of sin, not only individual sin, but collective sin, such as social injustice. To allow injustice to increase in the world constitutes a grave sin of omission.

Human advancement is part of the advancement of the Kingdom of God. The Church is definitely bound up in the task of guiding men through history to the fullness of the Kingdom. Christ is king, the Kingdom comes, to the extent that love, justice and truth reign, to the extent that man is freed from sin and its consequences. Christian hope is an eschatological hope, hope in the Kingdom and its full realization. And the Kingdom begins here; salvation begins in time. We cannot sit back with our arms folded and wait for the final coming of Christ. Christian hope is a creative hope—the hope of those who make God present to men, and the hope of those who condemn and struggle against injustice. Living in hope of the coming of the Kingdom does not diminish, but rather increases, the need to build a more human world (v. *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 57, 72, 88).

The Place of Religious and Priests

Religious are those whose life is a sign and witness to the fact that the Kingdom of God is above all. They have to be living witnesses to the fact that love, justice and truth form the base on which any true development of the world must stand. They have to be a prophetic sign and an eschatological witness attracting men to the Christian life, showing clearly that, without love, nothing is of value. Because they are freer than other men to concern themselves with essentials, to see what has value for God, they have now, more than ever, a particular duty to refuse to comply with existing injustices. For them, the absolute is God, is love, and they cannot be afraid to risk their lives for love of their oppressed brethren: 'Do not fear those who kill the body' (Luke 12, 4). In this way, more than ever, they will be witnessing to the fact that the Kingdom of God is above all, that the only worthwhile life is life in Jesus Christ. In this way they will be a sign of the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The priest, through his sacramental consecration, is placed in the world at the service of men. As pastor, he must show the greatest degree of solidarity with his brethren. The reality of his neighbour has to be deeply present to him in his evangelizing mission. Chosen to serve God, he is more than others ordered to the service of men.

His life no longer belongs to him, but he is the servant of Jesus Christ, the servant of man. If he forgets the suffering of his fellows, he forgets Christ, he ceases to be his representative. Full consciousness of his mission as shepherd requires him to be ready, if needs be, to lay down his life for his flock.

II. THE PRESENT REALITY OF BRAZIL

Let us now see how far the spirit of the Gospel is present in our society.

We live in a country where 125 of every 1,000 children born die before the age of one: in the Northern Rio Grande province, the number is 525, more than half. The majority of the population suffers from endemic diseases of malnutrition; two-thirds go hungry. Half are illiterate; education is still for the privileged classes: of every thousand children who start primary school, only one reaches university; many do not reach secondary level. The peasant lives in poverty and slavery: totally dependent on the landowners, he is exploited from birth to death. His wage is barely half the average for his region, and he is permanently in debt. Any attempt at revolt is harshly punished—even with death—either by the landowner and his henchmen, or by the so-called ‘forces of law and order’, who inevitably side with the landowner.

For the workers, life is not much different: they too depend on their employers for a wage kept down to a level barely sufficient to support a single person, the buying power of which is continually decreasing, whatever figures about the ‘impressive economic development of the country’ may claim. This without counting unemployment, which leaves him in direst poverty. He has no right to protest, and no right to strike. And the middle class is sinking continually towards the level of the proletariat.

The economic system produces the result characteristic of capitalism: the social group that owns the means of production gets richer and richer, with the working majority no more than an instrument for piling up wealth for their employers. The workers are cogs in a machine designed to serve wealth, not man. They are victims of structures that oppress them and that control the police and the army.

Foreign capital plays an increasing role, building its factories, seizing land, eliminating native competition, enlarging its power to exploit the natural riches of the country. All this is allowed and even encouraged by the political powers.

Institutionalized violence, already responsible for the deaths of thousands every year from hunger and disease, does not hesitate to turn itself into armed violence when it fears its interests might be threatened. The first signs of a change that endangered the privileges of the ruling classes produced armed forces in the streets. A military dictatorship was set up to preserve the *status quo*, to

prevent any sort of change that might have been favourable to the workers, since this would have meant the fall of the ruling class. The repressive measures that followed, whether economic (freezing of wages), or judicial (imprisonment, torture), bore most heavily on the working classes. Institutionalized violence now has arms at its service, and the ruling classes continue to oppress the people, now through military tactics. The people only get a mention in official speeches, and then it is likely to be the sort of comment that economic development would be 'painful'—meaning painful for the workers.

Since 1964, we have been in a 'state of exception' which becomes ever more violent. Opposition to the government is non-existent. Those who try to oppose are immediately imprisoned, then tortured; many have died. There is no freedom of expression, of assembly, of public demonstration. There are no elections, and we still have to go through the farce of presidential selection of the governors who are 'to be elected'. There is no freedom of the Press; we have to read foreign papers to learn what is happening in our own country, and many of these are prevented from circulating.

There is no freedom in education. Many of our best professors and teachers are imprisoned or expelled from the country, while the government has the face to complain of a 'brain drain'. There are no laws: the government does what it pleases, and the constitution is ineffective. Not even the unjust laws promulgated by the military dictatorship are respected: those relating to prisons, education, defence and the courts could never be put into practice. The régime's *raison d'être* is national security, and the people have never been less secure; at any moment they can be victims of injustice, thrown into prison, put to death. They live in terror, and the terrorism comes from the government. People are afraid to say what they think, because to do so can mean prison, torture, death. Torture has become a normal means of government; generals and ministers know of its existence, want it to continue and justify it. Women are raped by their torturers; children are given electric shocks—many are permanently maimed. (There are North American agents present at torture sessions.)

No one can trust anyone else. There are spies everywhere, even within families, and this is encouraged by the government. The number of political prisoners in São Paulo has increased tenfold since September last year. The dictatorship has now reached the stage where it regards everyone as subversive: peasants, workers, students, journalists, teachers, religious, bishops. Truth has become inconvenient, so the government practises lies: it denies there are tortures, it denies the existence of political prisoners, it declares it is following *Populorum Progressio*.

The Congress has become a farce, existing only to rubber-stamp government decrees; if it tries to act differently it is closed. The

country is in the grip of repression and the popular front movements have been extinguished. The people have no voice and no rights, and no power to organize themselves. Christians are persecuted—laymen, religious, bishops even, are victims of repression; many are in prison. Priests and bishops have their correspondence censored, their sermons taped, their meetings spied on. Truth can no longer be spoken: the faithful have been forbidden to hear it. The Gospel has become subversive: catechisms are censored by the government, priests are forbidden to say mass in prison, religious are prevented from renewing their vows and theological books are censored by the military courts.

Not that this sort of religious persecution is new: the Nazis practised it too. Christians today are imprisoned not for their beliefs—Christianity is not just a matter of theoretical belief—but because they hear the Word and try to put it into practice, because they perform the works that their faith requires. We live under a Nazi-Fascist régime, and official statements only confirm this. We are told that the nation must be strong, and that certain principles must be sacrificed to achieve this. There is even a new theory to justify the contempt shown for human rights: a new class of ‘non-citizen’ has come into being—the ‘pseudo-Brazilian’: that is, anyone who opposes the régime. So while the rights and dignity of the Brazilian are to be respected, those of the pseudo-Brazilian need not be. The government has even requested that revolutionaries should be excluded from the Declaration of Universal Human Rights (State of São Paulo, 21.4.70).

III. THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE SITUATION

The present Brazilian government acts in defiance of every single tenet of Christian social teaching. There is no freedom and no justice. For Christians, the time has come to speak out and, even more, to act.

¹ The government, of course, would like the Church to stay ‘in the sacristy’, to remain ‘purely spiritual’, to treat men as though they were angels. It would like the good Samaritan to concern himself only with the soul of the man who fell among thieves. But then the Church would no longer be the universal sacrament of salvation, continuing the presence of Christ in the world. It would become a negation of Christ and an obstacle to the spreading of his Kingdom.

Faced with the situation in Brazil, their conscience must impel Christians to the most forceful protest. A people is being suppressed, which means that Jesus Christ is being suppressed. The love that is our motive for action compels us to denounce all this injustice. Unjust laws should not be obeyed; to obey them is to submit to sin. St Thomas states this more than once. Christians have to struggle against unjust situations. But how, when the government has blocked all channels of protest, when there are no elections, no

constitution, no demonstrations? We cannot accept the present situation, because to do so would be to accept being less than human, and the government has left no peaceful way to change open. The only way a violent dictatorship has left to us is the way of revolution. This is the rightful self-defence of a people desperate under oppression—the right to fight for its life.

Both *Populorum Progressio* and the Medellín Document on Peace affirm that revolutions are no more than the consequence of desperate situations of oppression, and this is particularly true of Latin America. We cannot sit back with our arms folded in the face of the present situation in Brazil: the people have a right to wage a just war on oppression—a right fully recognized by theology. There is no other way out. So, driven by love for our brothers, by our evangelical understanding of truth, justice and freedom, conscious of our mission as a Church and as Christians—whether laymen, priests or religious—we are responding to the need to work with the people for their liberation, running the risks this entails in the climate of terrorism created by our violent military dictatorship. In this, we are following the course mapped out by St Paul: 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal. 5, 1).

The Concilium World Congress: Impressions and Reflections by Cornelius Ernst, O.P.

There had been a derailment ahead of us at Dover, so I was late arriving in Brussels. More delay getting a taxi, because I couldn't quite bring myself to use my elbows like everybody else; the hotel room booked for me, I calculated, would cost about £5 10s. a night, so unless I stopped eating or found another hotel I should have to return home well before the Congress ended. At last the Congress hall itself: the Palais de Congrès, past the illuminated fountains of the Mont des Arts and a small knot of cameramen, timidly into the Salle Albert 1^{er}—and it really hit one then: the long, high swooping hall, with what must have been a thousand people in it, the brilliant glare of the television lights reflected from the huge black and white poster at the back of the stage, bearing the words in English—

WORLD
FUTURE
CHURCH