

Title: "The Catholic Church and the Leftist Populist Regimes of Latin American: Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Paraguay."

Jeffrey Klaiber, S.J.

Research Project Description

This projects aims to examine the relations between the Catholic Church and the leftist populist regimes in Latin America, particularly the cases of Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Paraguay. During the last cycle of dictatorships the church played a prominent role in defending human rights and fostering dialogue (between the dictatorships and the opposition groups) in order to facilitate the return to democracy. Once again, the church is being drawn in a similar role vis-a-vis the leftist populist regimes, but in this new context the situation is more ambiguous and the roles are less clear. To begin with, all of these regimes have been democratically elected, but in several cases they have displayed authoritarian tendencies (in three cases the regimes have written new constitutions to allow for nearly permanent re-election) and have used pressure tactics to suppress freedom of speech. Substantial opposition groups have organized themselves against the regimes. But all these regimes are also supported by large segments of the lower classes.

In this context the Catholic Church is emerging as one of the principal voices of criticism of these regimes. But the Church is conscious that in the eyes of the government and popular opinion it runs the risk of being perceived as another opposition group. Furthermore, the Church is also conscious of the risk of polarizing the church itself: upper and middle class Latin Americans tend to oppose the regimes, while most of the support for them comes from the lower classes, among which are to be found many base ecclesial communities. But if the Church does not speak out it will lose whatever moral authority it still has.

But, in addition to these more political issues, there is a deeper and more complex problem which goes beyond the question of democracy versus dictatorship, or veiled dictatorships, and that is the church vis-a-vis the modern world, especially as concerns two questions: abortion and the right to choose and religious education. For some time feminist groups and other non-governmental advocacy groups have been pressuring for legalized abortion under certain conditions: in case of rape or therapeutic abortions to save the

mother's life. Some groups simply demand that the right to choose, under any circumstances, be incorporated in the new constitutions. So far, abortion is legal only in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Federal District of Mexico, and in Bolivia since 1973 in case of rape or to save the mother's life; but the issue is looming larger in the rest of Latin America. The leftist populist regimes, given their favorable stance toward socialism, have strong advocates within their ranks in favor of legalizing abortion.

The question of education is another problem. The leftist populist regimes allow for private education, but offer support only for public education. The regimes have also announced that they will support only secular (non-religious) education. But the Church is now heavily engaged in lower class education, of which the Fe y Alegría schools would be a prime example. The Fe y Alegría schools were founded by the Jesuits and receive state funding. The question as to whether the State will continue to fund Fe y Alegría and other church schools for the poor is under scrutiny because these are, technically, confessional schools, although they are open to all poor children of whatever religious background.

This project will examine the different stances and roles which the Catholic Church is assuming or is likely to assume in the face of these political, social, and moral challenges with particular references to the leftist populist regimes in Latin America today.

Methodology

A review will be made of all recent literature on the leftist populist regimes of Latin America, with particular attention paid to their relationship with the Catholic Church. Interviews will be conducted in each of the selected countries with knowledgeable observers.

Anticipated Results

A single article for an academic journal, and one or two articles for more broad-based publications.

Academic Contribution

To date there is no comprehensive review of the state of the Catholic Church or of Catholicism in Latin America, especially with reference to the leftist populist regimes, in the early twenty-first century. While some political analysts are re-examining the reality of

democracy in Latin America, little attention is being paid to the role the Catholic Church in this new scenario.

Publication Outlets

Academic Journals:

The Journal of Church and State (Baylor University). The author has published in this journal before.

The Americas (Franciscan Mission Academy, Washington, D.C.) The author has also published in this journal which emphasizes Latin American church history.

Publications geared for a broader non-academic audience:

America (Jesuits)

Commonweal