Shaping of the Church in the Americas

(1 of 5)

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As we explore the history of the church in the Americas --in this case particularly the Hispanic church—we must begin by realizing that when a great and unexpected event takes place those who are involved in it usually have little idea of its significance. It is normal to interpret any event in the light of previous events. I begin by pointing this out because it is difficult to put ourselves in the place of those living through those times when we already know something of the significance of what was happening then and what its consequences would be.

When, on the 12th of October 1492, a sailor on a ship named “La Pinta” shouted, “¡Tierra!” (Land ahoy), he probably was not thinking about a great discovery but rather the prize that had been promised to the first to see land and then about the possibility of fresh water and stretching his legs. The leader of this small squadron, sailing in the Santa Maria, thought he had sailed halfway around the world and reached the outskirts of the land he called Cipango (Japan).

When Columbus returned to Spain, bringing with him some of the people whom he called “Indians,” as well as many colorful feathers, gold nuggets, and various exotic objects, the Old World had to interpret what he reported and what they saw in terms of the world they knew and what their own interests determined.

We can see this by looking at three central figures in the entire process: Isabella, queen of Castile; her husband, Ferdinand, king of Aragon; and Pope Alexander VI.

When she was growing up, Isabella was an unlikely heir to the throne, but an even more unlikely set of circumstances made her queen of Castile. She brought to that position a view of the history of Castile and the surrounding areas that had been forged in the two centuries before her time. As she and her contemporaries saw the history of the land, that history was a long struggle that had begun immediately after the Moors had crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and destroyed the Christian Visigothic kingdom that ruled over most of the Peninsula. According to legend, resistance began in a cave in northern Spain where a Visigoth named Pelayo and a group of his followers made a solemn oath to retake the land from the Moors. (By the way, that cave must have been at least the size of the Mayflower, for the descendants of those who were there seem to be equally as numerous!)

According to that view of Spanish history, the struggle took almost eight centuries. Finally, on January 2, 1492, Granada, the last Moorish stronghold in the Peninsula, surrendered to Isabella and her troops.

Columbus was present when Granada surrendered. He had already been discussing his enterprise with Isabella and Ferdinand, and she had shown interest in the proposal. Shortly

after Granada surrendered, an agreement was reached between the queen and Columbus, and Columbus sailed on the 3rd of August, seven months after the fall of Granada.

While Isabella was queen of Castille, her husband Ferdinand was king of Aragon. They had agreed that they would share power and share it equally. To that effect, their motto was "*Monta tanto, tanto monta*" –"one is as important as the other, the other is as important as the one." They agreed on most matters of policy but not on all. Ferdinand represented the great House of Aragon, which had been extending its power throughout the Mediterranean to the point that it held sway over Sardinia, Sicily, southern Italy, and as far east as Athens. Ferdinand himself had close ties with Pope Alexander VI, who himself was an Aragonese and served as godfather for Ferdinand and Isabella's only son.

Isabella was deeply committed to the reformation of the church in Spain. Ferdinand, on the other hand, appointed his illegitimate ten-year-old son Alonso as archbishop of Zaragoza and, therefore, head of the church in the entire kingdom of Aragon.

Isabella's and Ferdinand's bodies now lie next to one another in the cathedral of Granada. The sculpture of Isabella on the lid of her sarcophagus is realistic, so that her head sinks in the soft pillow. Ferdinand's sculpture is not as realistic, and his head just sits on the pillow. If you visit it today your guide will probably say that both are equally realistic, and the difference is simply in that she had more brains than he did!

When Columbus returned from his first voyage, Isabella decided that the great historical task of her kingdom was to continue the expansion of Christianity into heathen lands, just as before it had retaken its own land from Muslim infidels. Ferdinand, on the other hand, kept his face turned towards the Mediterranean, particularly supporting the policies of Pope Alexander.

Then we come to Alexander himself. He headed the House of Borgia and was more interested in uniting Italy under the rule of his son, Cesar, than in reforming the church or converting the peoples with whom Columbus had made contact.

Columbus had just reported on his first voyage, and had begun to plan for a second voyage, when, at the request of Ferdinand, Alexander issued a series of bulls, all dated in 1493, granting to the crown of Castille the right of "royal patronage" –*Patronato Real*. As it eventually developed, it included the right to rule in all political and religious matters over all lands discovered or to be discovered, as long as this was done by sailing westward, and no further east than an imaginary line West of the Azores. (Obviously, this is a prime example of trying to respond to a new situation with outmoded paradigms. Earlier popes had granted the crown of Portugal similar rights, as they circumnavigated Africa and moved eastward into Asia. Apparently, Alexander, although fully aware that the Earth was round, did not bother to think about what would happen on the other side of the world when those sailing eastward would meet those sailing westward. But that is another story.)

This is important for two reasons. One is that what is frequently said--that the gold and riches of the New World were collected by the church and sent to Rome--is absolutely false. That would probably have been the case had Pope Alexander realized the wealth of the lands opened up by Columbus. But to him those lands were just one more bother. He had no wish to supervise or to subsidize missionary work that far away. So, he simply dumped the responsibility on Isabella, Queen of Castile, and therefore also on her consort, Ferdinand of Aragon.

The second reason why the P*atronato Real* is important is that it shaped the entire life and character of the church in Spanish and Portuguese America well into the 19th century, and arguably until today. Alexander's bulls, as clarified in 1501, stipulated that the crown was responsible for collecting all tithes and other income of the nascent church and responsible also for all its expenses. This included both the churches established to serve colonizers and all missionary work seeking the conversion of the original inhabitants of the land. In 1508, Pope Julius II ---who was more a warrior than a priest-- gave the Spanish crown the right to name those who were to occupy all high officers in the church and to have those nominations confirmed by the papacy. The creation of a new diocese or religious province was also in the hands of Spanish and Portuguese authorities. Missionary orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans could operate only where the representatives of the crown determined and in the manner in which they determined. Eventually, Spanish theologians began speaking no longer of a “Royal Patronage” but also of a “Royal Vicariate,” meaning that, just as the Pope is the Vicar or plenipotentiary representative of Jesus, so is the King the Vicar of the Pope. This was much

debated, and never fully accepted; but the mere fact that it was proposed tells much about the real authority of the pope. It has been said, with some exaggeration but also with some justification, that the church in Iberian America was almost as independent from the papacy as was the Church of England under Henry VIII.

The *Patronato* had immediate and lasting consequences. Since there were not sufficient priests who felt a calling to serve in the new lands, a law was passed that no ship could sail for the "Indies" without carrying priests to serve in the emerging colonies. The result was that while such missionaries were recruited, the nature of their calling was not the best. Captains ready to sail, and needing to meet this requirement, simply looked around for any cleric available, with little regard for aptitude or the reason why he might wish to leave Spain. Thus, although there were many dedicated pastors and missionaries, some to the point of enormous sacrifices, these were the minority.

Another consequence of royal patronage was that the higher echelons of the hierarchy were more loyal to the crown than to the church, to their flock, or even to the papacy itself. As time went by, and people born in the colonies joined the clergy or a monastic order, they were generally excluded from those higher echelons simply because they did not have the contacts in Spain that would lead to their being appointed to positions of high responsibility. This created a two-class system in the church —and society--, similar to the system that soon developed in government. Those born in Spain were called *peninsulares*–people from the Iberian Peninsula.

Those of Spanish descent living in the Indies were called *criollos* –people from the land. Since the viceroy or governor had to be appointed by the crown, it was very unlikely that a *criollo* magistrate or civil servant born and raised in the colonies would reach positions of high authority. The same was true of the church. In the colonies, there was no shortage of people ready to join monastic institutions or to seek ordination into the priesthood. Since the need was great, *criollos* were sought and encouraged to join the priesthood. But there was a limit beyond which a *criollo* usually could not go. When the Indians and Africans were added to the mix, this resulted in a racist social stratification of mystifying complexity.

The consequences of the *Patronato Real* were not limited to the very early years of conquest and colonization. On the contrary, they played their role throughout the history of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and even on the beginnings of Protestantism.

Unfortunately, we have time only to take a brief break and fast-forward into the beginning of the 19th century, when most of Latin America became independent. With very few exceptions, the Catholic hierarchy supported the crown, even after their cause was completely lost. As a result, most of them were expelled from the new republics. These new nations declared themselves heirs to all the rights and properties of the crown within their lands. This included the right of patronage. According to the laws of most of the new nations, their government, therefore, had the right to nominate their own bishops and archbishops, and the Pope was supposed to ratify those appointments. This put the pope between a rock and a hard place. On

the one hand, Spain was still an important power in Europe, and the Pope could not risk alienating it by acknowledging the authority of the new governments. If, on the other hand, the Pope ratified the nominees of the Spanish crown, they would never be allowed to land in the nations to which they were appointed. The net result was that for a long time –in some cases, for decades– most dioceses in Spanish America were vacant. When they were filled, many appointments were embroiled in the political vicissitudes of various countries.

The lack of bishops was eventually reflected in the lack of priests, for only bishops could ordain priests. The lack of priests was reflected in the lack of those sacraments that could only be celebrated by a priest. This was most noticeable in the cases of confession and of communion, or the mass, which was practically unavailable to people in rural areas. In some areas, priests would travel from town to town in order to say mass, hear confessions, baptize, and celebrate marriages. Preaching practically disappeared. Mass itself became a distant ritual, or perhaps a drama, so that people would commonly say, not “I am going to mass," but rather “I am going to *hear* mass.”

This led to a form of Catholicism that was nurtured mostly by rituals led by the laity itself –by a laity who knew only the basic elements of Christian faith and, therefore, limited itself to ceremonies and set words. In many areas, the rosary took the place of the mass.

By the time when –mostly through a series of negotiations and concordats– it became possible for the pope to name bishops for the new republics, the situation was practically irreversible. The priesthood itself had become much less attractive to young men who did not wish to spend their lives running from place to place just to say mass while having little personal contact with the people. Clerical celibacy, even though often ignored, was a further obstacle. In most countries, the loss of social status for the priesthood put an end to the tradition of the elite devoting younger sons to the priesthood. Parishes went vacant for long periods, and it was not rare to find areas where there was a ratio of one priest for every ten-thousand believers.

I could still see the consequences of all of this as I was growing up. When my classmates were asked about their religion, they would often say: "*Soy católico, pero no creo en los curas*" –I am a Catholic, but I don't believe in priests– or "*Soy católico a mi manera*" –I am a Catholic after my own fashion.

To this was added the religious policy of most of the new governments. After independence, the political life of most of the new nations focused on the contrast between two main directions that took particular names in different countries but were generally called "conservatives" and "liberals." These two names require some explanation, for in many ways their meaning was the opposite of what they mean in the United States today. The conservatives were mostly the old aristocracy, composed of landowners whose enterprises had formerly been supported by the policies of the state and who now expected to have the same support from the new

governments. Generally, they did not wish to have the government investing funds in matters such as public education and public health and did not see much point in educating a population that, after all, was supposed to continue serving as plantation workers or as laborers in industries derived from what was grown in the plantations –notably in the sugar industry and in salt beef, industries that provided outlets for what was produced in the latifundia of the rich. These conservatives found in the Church a staunch ally, particularly in their hope to suppress new and insidious ideas such as a free market, freedom of speech and assembly, public education led by the state, and the like. In stark contrast to these conservatives, the "liberals" felt that the laws of supply and demand, and the new opportunities of the industrial revolution, did not need direct government intervention of any kind. For them, the best economic policy was for the government to stay out of it. The government did have an important role, not directly in regulating the economy but rather in preparing the people who would lead into the new economic order that they saw emerging. Concretely, this meant an educational system available to as many as possible and not controlled by the church and its conservative allies.

The reason why I have taken the time to draw this picture is that this is of fundamental importance for the history of Protestantism in Latin America. The early leaders of most Latin American nations were liberal. While they remained generally Catholic, and had no intention of becoming Protestants, they saw in Protestantism an ally in their struggle to limit the power of the Catholic Church. This led them in two directions: First, they promoted immigration from

Protestant lands. As a result, today there are in Latin America millions of Protestants with German and Scottish last names.

Second, these liberal Latin American leaders encouraged Protestant missionaries. Again, they themselves had no intention of becoming Protestants, but Protestantism would help them in their struggles against a Catholic Church that openly supported conservatism. This is why the first Protestant missionary in Latin America, a Scotsman by the name of James Thomson (Diego Thomson), who came with the Bible on one hand and a revolutionary system of education on the other, was made an honorary citizen of Argentina before he traveled to Chile at the invitation of Bernardo O'Higgins, who also made him an honorary citizen of Chile; and from there he went to Peru, where president José de San Martín surprised him by visiting him in his hotel room, expropriating the Dominican Colegio de Santo Tomás in order to house Thomson's first school, and then ordering that all public schools in the nation follow his method. When the liberal president of Guatemala, Justo Rufino Barrios, was returning from a visit to Europe, he stopped in New York City to visit the Presbyterian Board of Missions, invite their missionaries, and offer them land to build a church. And that is the reason why to this day the Central Presbyterian Church of Guatemala City is next door to the presidential palace.

But after our fast-forward that has taken us well beyond the 16th century and into the 21st it is now time to rewind and go back to the 15th and 16th centuries and the shaping of the church in Latin America.

It is said that when Queen Isabella learned that Christopher Columbus had brought back a number of Indians to sell as slaves as a means to make his explorations profitable, she said: "Who does the Admiral think he is, that he dares enslave my subjects?" These words could be a very brief preview of what would happen in the years following: At least in theory, Isabella and her successors would believe that they had the duty to protect the native inhabitants of these lands. But they also show that Isabella herself took for granted that the people in those lands were her subjects.

She had good reason to believe that. Pope Alexander VI had declared it. But was it legitimate to make war on them and take their lands? Isabella had been dead for some six years in 1510, when a famous jurist provided a solution that would be the law for decades: This solution was a document to be read to the rulers of the native peoples inviting them to decide their fate. This document, called the "*Requerimiento*" because it required the Indians' agreement, basically said that God came to earth and appointed Peter and his successors as lords of the world, that this universal lord has granted these lands to Ferdinand and to his daughter Juana, and that if the present native rulers now accept all of this peacefully and immediately their Highnesses will grant them their lands, peace, and various benefits. Then it went on: "But if you do not do this, … with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and we will subject you to the yoke and obedience of the church and of their Highnesses. We shall take you and your wives and your children, and

make slaves of them. … And any deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not of their Highnesses or ours."

Once this document had been read –usually in Spanish and with no translation or further explanation– the Spanish felt justified in making war on the Indians.

Making war, however, did not make Christians. Even the *conquistadores* understood that! Some way had to be found to teach Christianity to these "heathen" and "rebellious subjects" of the crown. The solution was simple: entrust a number of Indians to a Spaniard, who would be responsible to teach them the Christian faith. In return for this great benefit, the Indians will be expected and obliged to serve their trustees. Since the Indians were *encomendados* "entrusted" to their Spanish lord, the entire system was called *encomiendas*, and a trustee was an *encomendero*.

Obviously, the *encomiendas* were most often a subterfuge for slavery. Very few among the Spanish made any effort to understand the various languages of the Indians, and it took many years for most Indians to understand the Spanish of their supposed teachers. In most cases, *encomiendas* turned out to be even worse than slavery itself. An *encomendero* had no investment in the people entrusted to him, who, therefore, were treated as less than property. If Indians became sick and could not work, many an *encomendero* would let them die so they could be replaced free of cost. When, in order to distinguish an *encomienda* from slavery, the

law declared that the children of Indians in an *encomienda* would not be part of the *encomienda*; the result was further oppression. Since a pregnant woman would be limited in the work she could do, and her child would not be the property of the *encomendero*, *encomenderos* had a vested interest in preventing procreation. (Except in the frequent cases in which an *encomendero* took the women entrusted to him as a personal harem.)

The *encomiendas* were already applied in the very first colonies on the island of Hispaniola and then in each land as it was conquered. (Although I mentioned the *Requerimiento* before discussing the *encomiendas*, the actual chronological order was the reverse: There were encomiendas in Hispaniola before the *Requerimiento* was enacted.) As we shall see in the next hour, the *encomiendas* were often criticized, and on occasion laws were issued against some of their worst abuses. But the distance between the colonies and Spain, and the time it took to take a protest to Spain, to discuss it, and to pass a law, meant that quite often by the time a law was proclaimed in the New World reasons had been found to delay obedience, or even to ignore the laws altogether.

From the point of view of the Spanish, the *encomiendas* seemed to make some sense in the islands of the Caribbean, where the population was not numerous, and it was relatively easy to subject most of it to the *encomienda* system.

As the colonial enterprise expanded, the system of *encomiendas* was applied in many of the new lands. When the Spanish conquered large kingdoms, such as those of the Aztecs and the Incas, they had a vested interest in not dismantling the entire order of the existing societies. That order produced riches that flowed to the center of the ancient empires, where the Spanish gathered the benefits that they could not have gathered without the existing social structure. In such areas, one way to teach Christianity to the existing society was to take over the education of the younger generations among the traditional nobility, in the hope that they would then teach the faith to those who would be under their authority.

At the other extreme, there were nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples who, from the point of view of Spanish Christians, would seem to be best served by being brought into communities in which they could live under the guidance of missionary friars who would teach them Christianity and also help protect them against various enemies. Today known commonly as "*misiones*," at the beginning, these places were usually called "*reducciones*," since their purpose was to "reduce" the Indians into towns. Such endeavors have been praised for their work organizing the Indians and giving them power to defend themselves and also severely criticized for their paternalism and their use of physical punishment. The two sides of this debate may be seen in the case of Junípero Serra, who is still admired by many for the work he did organizing towns in California and strongly criticized for his paternalism and his abusive methods. A similar ambiguity surrounds the case of the Jesuit missions in Paraguay, which enabled the Guaraní people to defeat the repeated incursions from Brazil of Paulistas seeking to capture and enslave

them. The Jesuits entrusted the Guaraní with the making and use of firearms and also taught them to build organs as sophisticated as any in Europe. But their paternalism was such that when the Jesuits were expelled from all Spanish territories most of their missions were unable to survive.

All of this is probably too much to digest in 45 minutes. Therefore, let me end with a general overview of what is my main point, and which I would call "The Two Faces of the Church in Latin America." In order to understand what I am about to say, it is necessary to explain the difference between two titles that make little sense in today's English: "secular clergy," and "religious clergy." Oddly enough, secular clergy are not particularly worldly, and religious clergy are not particularly religious. The difference is that the first of these live "in the world" (*in saeculum*) –meaning, outside of monastic houses– and the others follow a particular "religion" –by which is not meant that they are Muslims or Buddhists but rather that they are Franciscan, Dominican, Jesuit, etc. In practical terms, the main differences are that secular clergy are under the direct authority of a bishop and that their vows do not include a vow of poverty, while religious clergy live under a "rule," such as the rule of Saint Francis, and have vows of poverty. While often serving as priests under a bishop, their obedience is due primarily to their order and usually ultimately to the Pope.

In practical terms, in colonial Latin America this meant that most secular clergy were assigned to serve in cities and population centers in which the church had already established its authority

and where life in general was organized after the pattern of Spanish tradition and culture. In contrast, it was religious clergy –mostly Franciscans, Dominicans, and later also Jesuits– who went into the hinterlands in order to serve among the native population.

The difference between these two groups, in their perspective, in their motivation, and in what they saw, was stark.

Secular clergy serving in cities, where native Indians had been forced to live, often saw Indians uprooted from their environment with broken families, ill-fitting clothes, trying to speak in a language not their own, suffering need, depressed, confused, not invested in their work, plodding along with the current. In a word, they often saw them as miserable creatures in need of direction and commiseration and quite frequently questioned whether they were even human beings with human souls.

Meanwhile, religious clergy –Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, and others– would be living among the Indians or visiting with them for extended periods. They saw parents caring for their children and for their own parents. They heard their songs, saw their dances, sat by the fire with them, trying to understand their language and their legends. They saw their art. Asking about the traditions such art depicted, some sought to preserve it. These priests saw the indigenous communities weave their traditional garments, grow their food, build their dwellings, work in

collaboration. In a word, they saw them as full human beings, with souls as worthy of salvation as any other, with bodies as worthy of care and respect as any other.

Time passed; the colonies began claiming their independence, and once again the two faces of the church emerged in full clarity. One was the face of the church under royal patronage, subservient to a king who forgot the loyalty those colonies had demonstrated when under Napoleon the French forced him into exile, and he now demanded an unconditional allegiance. This was the church of bishops and archbishops, of abbots, governors, and viceroys; the church that often abused the secret of confession to let the state know who was disloyal.

And there was the other face. The face of a priest who at the “Grito de Dolores” proclaimed freedom and equality for all Indians and mestizos, and who took as his banner the image of a mestizo Virgin, who according to the legend spoke in Náuatl rather than in Spanish, a Virgin who shamed the wise and scholarly Spanish bishop of Mexico by speaking to him through an illiterate Indian.

More years passed. It was 1974. Catherine and I were in Ecuador, at a meeting of the Division on Ministry of CELAM (the Roman Catholic Council of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops), where I had been invited to speak. It was a surprising gathering. There we met nuns who were running parishes. They would hear confessions, and when a priest visited every few weeks, he

would pronounce absolution on all the congregation and consecrate the elements of communion to be dispensed by the nuns every Sunday until his next visit.

There were also official representatives of the Pope –some of them with enormous power in the lives and appointments of bishops.

It was a quiet and uneventful meeting. I would even say it was a discouraging meeting. People seemed to be afraid of the reports that would eventually reach Rome.

Then one day at mass, when the time came for the prayers of the faithful, a voice at the back of the chapel prayed: “O God, illumine our Holy Father in Rome, and those who advise him, so that they may cease impeding your ministry in Latin America.”

When I looked up, I saw a different face. The meeting came to life. In the end, they sent a report to Rome basically advocating for the ordination and reinstallation of married priests and bravely reopening the possibility of ordaining women.

At that time, when most of Central America found itself embroiled in war, once again we saw the two faces of the church. While some Catholic leaders blessed the weapons brought from abroad, priests, nuns, and hundreds of lay catechists died –many of them shot by those weapons. I have a tape of the funeral sermon that Archbishop Oscar Romero, of El Salvador, was

preaching on March 29, 1980. In that tape, just as he says, “unless it dies, a grain of wheat cannot bear fruit,” shots are heard. Romero died, but his “face” of the church did not die.

As to the report that our meeting in Ecuador sent to Rome, I do not know what happened to it. It probably was rapidly suppressed and is now hidden deep in the archives of the Vatican. But I do know one thing: Someday, somehow, that face will emerge again, that voice reminding the entire Catholic Church and the entire church catholic, that the face of the church, the face of the body of Christ, the face of Christ himself, is a face of love, justice, and grace.