

Ibero-American church calls for debt forgiveness, continental integration

by Valerie Rush

Pope John Paul II will be visiting four countries in Ibero-America—Venezuela, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador—next February, and a huge brawl is already under way between forces allied to the Vatican's integration and development perspective for the continent, and those who would plunge Ibero-America into a maelstrom of ethnic and civil wars. This is more than a war of words.

In Nicaragua, 15 Catholic churches have been fire-bombed and otherwise attacked, since May of this year, and Cardinal Obando y Bravo has received numerous death threats.

In Venezuela, there is a live plot to topple the government of President Rafael Caldera before the pope's arrival, largely because of the Venezuelan President's adherence to the social doctrine of the church on economic policy matters. Caldera has been under constant siege for his "old-fashioned" resistance to the global dictates of the international banks, and for his dedication to the economic integration of the region. His May 1995 visit to the Vatican, where he and the pope saw eye to eye on these matters, triggered the current offensive to overthrow his government.

In addition to such economic issues, there is a second, philosophical and political side to the ongoing battle involving the Catholic Church in Ibero-America. The gnostic "theology of liberation" forces, represented by the likes of Zapatista commander Samuel Ruiz, bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, in Chiapas, Mexico, are out to shatter the institution of the church, and thus, one of the key obstacles to the international financial oligarchy's intended re-colonization of the Ibero-American continent under the rubric of "free trade."

'Forgive us our debts'

The failure of Ibero-America's political leaders to cry "Enough!" to the murderous dictates of the international banking elites has brought the continent to the brink of social and economic disintegration. One nation after another struggles to stave off bankruptcy by auctioning off its sovereign assets and digging itself deeper into debt. Among those few voices which have denounced this process is that of the Roman Catholic Church. For months, courageous church lead-

ers from across the continent have warned that the free trade, or "neo-liberal" economic system is driving populations into ever greater misery, a new form of enslavement which can only lead to violence and destruction.

Pope John Paul II has given his followers within the church a focus for intervention, as exemplified by his dramatic call during his just-concluded visit to the United States, for a "new ethic" in economic policy which can protect the divine spark of human creativity, and for a Jubilee for the Year 2000.

The Jubilee is an ancient Judeo-Christian practice of dedicating a special period of time to renewing one's relationship to God. During this time, generally a year in length, slaves are freed, debts are pardoned, and injustice and inequality are redressed. In his 1994 apostolic letter, "On the Threshold of the Third Millennium," John Paul II proposed to the church, and to the world, that the preparations for a Jubilee in the Year 2000 should include "a significant reduction, if not total forgiveness, of the international debt, which weighs heavily upon the future of so many nations."

During the 25th annual assembly of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM), held last May in Mexico, this proposal was taken up. The final document issued by that assembly, entitled "Latin America: Rise and Walk!" declared: "We want to say out loud: We cannot remain indifferent to the signs of death everywhere: extreme poverty, growing unemployment, uncontained violence, and so many forms of corruption and impunity which sink millions of families in anguish and pain.

"The origin of these evils is, doubtless, in the heart of man, and in the unjust systems which erupt from sin. We denounce, as one of the main causes of such inequality . . . the reification of market forces and of the power of money, forgetting that the economy should be at the service of man, and not the reverse."

A victim of usury

The election of a new CELAM president at the assembly was a battle in itself, and the choice of Tegucigalpa Archbishop Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga for the post guaranteed an approach to the economic and political crises consonant with

the pope's. Addressing a late-July meeting in Bogotá, Colombia, Monsignor Rodríguez Maradiaga directly called for forgiveness of the continent's foreign debt, which he called a "product of usury [which] commits offense against the very lives of millions of people." He specified that "uncontrolled interest rates are the principal cause of that debt," and offered the following as an example: "The amount of [Latin America's] loans was \$86 billion, but Latin America has paid the banks \$418 billion," and yet still owes another \$533 billion!

Rodríguez Maradiaga's arguments were seconded by clerics in numerous other countries. For example, in August of this year, the Argentine Catholic Church convoked a three-day seminar of priests in the austerity-ravaged province of Córdoba, to analyze the free-trade economic policies adopted by the Carlos Menem government. The concluding statement of the gathering denounced "the free-trade model as inevitably savage and inhumane because it prevents the majority of the population from earning their bread through the fruits of their labor."

Msgr. Italo Di Stefano, president of the pastoral commission of the Argentine Catholic Church, warned that free-trade policies were leading to the "progressive disintegration of the culture, of the family, and of our people." The assembly concluded that "the asphyxiation of the regional economies requires a rescheduling of the foreign debt."

Perhaps the most striking intervention to date has been a new document issued by CELAM in September of this year, which took direct aim at the free-trade economic model:

"In Latin America, globalization and [economic] opening have brought us a new dictator: the market. In our countries, we face a growing poverty because 20% of the rich nations possess more than 82% of the income, control more than 81% of the trade, and assume nearly 95% of the loans." This, says the CELAM document, presents us with the permanent threat of "the subversion of our nations by poverty."

The CELAM document asserts that if poverty is not addressed, "the spiral of violence will escalate. . . . We must stop posing as modern: Modernity and misery are a contradiction; modernity and marginalization are a contradiction; modernity and social discrimination are a contradiction. Our political institutions must adapt to social demands, and not merely to technocratic rationality. The States of Latin America and of the Caribbean are challenged to fulfill the expectations of our revolutions: to achieve economic development together with democracy and social justice."

And in its boldest language yet, CELAM insists: "We must recognize that today, more than ever, we must join forces, because if we don't fight together we run the risk of being hung separately."

The gnostic serpent

The pope's views find powerful enemies within the Catholic Church, from the gnostic "Theology of Liberation" cir-

cles. Their viewpoint is best summed up by a key ideologue of the "theo-lib" forces, Swiss fascist existentialist Hans Küng, who told the 15th Congress of Theology held recently in Madrid that the pope's "fundamental error" was "to identify himself with the truth. John Paul II is a product of Polish messianism from the last century. . . . The pope has always been anti-democratic; [he follows] the traditional Roman Catholic model, which is authoritarian and totalitarian."

The supposed "totalitarian" nature of the Vatican and of the State is also constantly attacked by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, commander of the narco-terrorist Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas. Ruiz has been for years a leading spokesman for the creation of an "autochthonous indigenous church," which would employ the Indian populations of Ibero-America as a battering-ram against both the Catholic Church itself and, as can be seen in Chiapas, as a separatist insurgency against the nation-state. On both counts, Ruiz and his mentors are in the service of British intelligence services, and their geopolitical goals.

"Commander" Ruiz's role as the organizer of a narco-terrorist insurgency has been at the center of a fierce battle inside Mexico, with both the Catholic Church and the Mexican government split over how to deal with him. Repeated attempts by Vatican-allied forces to oust Ruiz from his bishopric in Chiapas have been thwarted, as much by his supporters within the government and the Catholic Church as by pro-terrorist non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International and Americas Watch. Theology of Liberation networks in Ibero-America, the United States, and Europe have been especially active in campaigning for Ruiz to be granted the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize, which Ruiz bragged would serve as his "bullet-proof vest" against the Vatican and others. However, this was not to be. Ruiz was not awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which will leave him less able to thwart Vatican interests.

In mid-August, the Vatican succeeded in "clipping the wings" of this terrorist bishop, by appointing Monsignor Raúl Vera López, from the anti-Theology of Liberation faction, as coadjutor bishop in San Cristóbal, with full intervention *and* succession rights. At the same time, Ruiz's right-hand man, Gonzalo Ituarte, was ordered to leave the Chiapas diocese and take up a new post in Spain.

However welcome such a move, it has not solved the problem, in Chiapas or elsewhere on the continent. The rampaging Landless Movement in Brazil, allegedly a response to the government's failure to enact a serious agrarian reform, is in fact closely tied to the powerful Theology of Liberation forces within that country's Catholic Church. And the bombing campaign against Catholic churches and schools in Nicaragua, as well as repeated death threats against Nicaraguan Cardinal Obando y Bravo, are believed to be linked to the pope's upcoming visit to that country in February.