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THE CHURCH IN BRAZIL: AN INSTRUMENT OF
SOCIAL CHANGE OR STABILITY

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An Essay

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ABSTRACT

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Since 1964 the people of Brazil have been living under an oppressive military government which not only does not intend to turn the government back to the people but seems to have the support of the United States in its activities. A revolution of violent nature is very possible in the near future. The only segment of the Brazilian society that can prevent a violent and bloody overthrow of the status quo is the Catholic Church. Like all of Brazil, it is also going through a change, but for the better, and is found in the vanguard of those willing to fight and die for the social and economic changes that Brazil needs, not to forget the political. The Church, if it is encouraged and able to use its great influence, and if it is not already too late, can help in bringing peace and justice and stability to Brazil. With the proper assistance of the United States' interests this can happen more quickly and less violently.

THE CHURCH IN BRAZIL: AN INSTRUMENT
OF SOCIAL CHANGE OR STABILITY?

In Brazil, as in all of Latin America, a remarkable social revolution has been taking place in the past decade. We have heard for years of the grave social and economic conditions existing in Latin America, and surely events in Cuba, Panama, Bolivia, and more recently in Chile, should bring home to us the urgency of our understanding of the present crisis sweeping Latin America. It is being called more and more frequently the world's most critical area. Since the great majority of the people are Catholic, it is of great interest to Catholics all over the world that the Church in Latin America be in the forefront of the battle for justice and equality.

The Church is answering the challenge, finally, and hopefully not too late. A new world and a new mission for the Church are evolving, where the fruits of victory are not to be spiritual alone, but also material and physical. A revolution is taking place in Latin America, and the Catholic Church is beginning to lead that revolution, and in no part of Latin America is this move more evident than in Brazil.

The "chamber-of-commerce" picture of Brazil today is that of the colossus of Latin America. She occupies 47 percent of the South American continent, and ranks fifth in size among the countries

of the world after the USSR, Canada, China and the United States. She has a population of 92.2 million, and immense, untapped natural resources. Her economy, aided in 1970 alone by \$2 billion of foreign investment (\$867 million from the United States), expanded by nine percent in the last two years. For these reasons Brazil is considered by North American investors and politicians as a potential world power.

There is another picture of Brazil today, however, which is not so rosy. True, since 1945 Brazil has been in the throes of revolutionary change. The structural collapse of Brazilian economy, society, and politics was responsible for the armed forces casting aside their traditional nonpartisan and supranational role. The stabilizing actions taken by the armed forces since 1945 and the ultimate take-over of the government in 1964 by the military generals were advertised and believed to be timely thrusts against antiquated systems which had to be destroyed and rebuilt if Brazil were to have a modern efficient and democratic government.

The party in power, under General Emilio G. Medici, made several promises on taking over the government in October 1969, one of which was that by the end of the term of office in 1974 it was intended that democracy be definitely installed in Brazil and that there would be fixed bases for social and economic development. Within six months after his assumption of office, the

democratic vision of the President faded away, and for all practical purposes a revolutionary state was proclaimed. As late as March 10, 1970, the general took to the communications media and announced to all Brazilians that the revolutionary state signified the decision of the military dictatorship, now in possession of unlimited discretionary powers, to continue in office for as long as it takes to remake Brazil according to its own lights.

Terror and brutality are now apparently the order of the day in Brazil, and no doubt will continue to be, since those who are now in power have risen to their positions by extreme violence against civilians and dissident fellow officers. Political prisoners, and this includes members of Congress, clergy, students, teachers, men and women, have been denied the right of habeas corpus, held incommunicado, tortured, and in extreme cases, murdered, all with the toleration, if not the active encouragement, of the nation's military rulers. Accounts of these events have reached the world press, and the Vatican has received direct reports of many atrocities perpetrated by the government under the name of justice.

Unless "soft-line" officers, if they dare, attempt to exert a more liberalizing influence on the military government of Brazil, the Medici ruling clique and its present political course can only lead to further violence in Brazil. The greatest threat to Brazil is not from subversive elements, but rather from the precarious political structure of a military government which refuses to hear

the clamoring voices of its people, the now familiar slowness of economic and social change, the impatience of the younger elements of Brazilian intelligentsia, and the quickness of subversive elements to capitalize on these ingredients for revolution of another sort.

There remains only one segment of Brazilian society that can speak out against the government with relative impunity, and that is the Roman Catholic Church. The Church is the whipping-boy for most of the troubles in Latin America, and has been the favorite target of those who do not wish to place any blame on the North American supported regimes in power. Who has not heard the oft-repeated question: "Where is the Church? Why doesn't it do something?"

Thomas G. Sanders in his article on "The Church in Latin America" hits the nail on the head with his opening:

"The Roman Catholic Church in Latin America has long been criticized for helping to maintain an anachronistic social system and economic underdevelopment--low levels of education, a rigid class system, disinterest in economic achievement and valorization of order and tradition. . . . Yet today no institution in Latin America is changing more rapidly than the Catholic Church, and in directions that have important implications not only for defining new relationships between Christianity and the values of society, but also for the role that the Church will play in the region's development."¹

¹Thomas G. Sanders, Foreign Affairs, January 1970, Vol 48, No. 2, p. 285.

Currently the Church is one of the foremost agents for change in Latin America, and this particularly applies to Brazil. While suffering from important internal weaknesses, not always excusable, still, the Church in Brazil did not have to undergo the same types of persecution which it has been forced to endure elsewhere in Latin America.

An important item that we in the United States have in common with Brazil is that we both were born of revolution. The ideology of the American Revolution of 1776 found its counterpart among the Latin American countries generally during their revolution in the years 1810 to 1830. Independence came to Brazil in 1829, but this did not improve the image of the Church which came under the domination of a liberal-Masonic government. A shortage of priests, following the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1759, made it more and more difficult to reach the growing population which still called itself Catholic. Still, in the throwing off of the yoke of Portuguese rule, the people found the Church still with them, fostering the ideas of democracy and the rights of men. Its mission had not changed, but at that time it was not ready to accept the challenge of adaptation to changing patterns of life. Now, today, if the Church fails to lead Catholics in Brazil in the reforms they so desperately need, if she fails to adapt to modern social conditions, she will be left behind.

The political pot has been boiling over for decades in Brazil, and in fairness to the Church, religion cannot flourish in a milieu where civil strife is the rule rather than the exception. The struggle for food, for existence, the familiar scene of pillage and destruction, the ever-present military levies, demands of exhausted treasuries, the insecurity of rulers and governments, all that goes along with war and trouble, resulted in an image of an armed camp. Education suffered, so did the Church. Organization of religious agencies and parishes was swept aside in the constant march of armies, and the result was that the military politicians and strong men, the caudillos, became the heroes of youth rather than the traditional models held up by the Church. Brazilian youth did not answer the call for vocations, and the Church became the refuge of women and children only.

American tourists to Brazil could not help but notice the absence of men during religious services. Fortunately, this is changing, too. Just as the Catholic Church was present in the making of Brazilian culture and was incarnated in almost all human activities, so today it is becoming more and more involved in all areas of concern, including social, political, and economic, not just religious.

The social revolution in Brazil, as in all of Latin America, is seeking radical, integral and rapid change. The huge majority of the people are determined not to accept any longer the present social order with its injustices caused by an imbalance of the few

and the many, the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. Our suffering brothers to the south demand that something be done now, and we should be warned not to continue to be blind to their misery or their determination to live with the dignity of human beings.

How can we in the United States help? We are accused of generally being ignorant of the social conditions of Brazil and of the importance of the Church there, at least to the people. We can learn about Latin America--its history, the new image of the Church there, its involvement in the social revolution that is taking place. We should know about the slum dwellers and overworked pastors of Brazil, about a Church tormented by Communist agents and ignored by a military dictatorship, about supposed and real social injustices.

There is much to learn about Brazil, about the new nationalism, the new pride. Brazilians, perhaps much to our surprise, do not want only our financial aid. They do not want us to keep supporting and encouraging the type of government that Brazil no longer has a need for. But they do want to remain our friends, and the Church is helping and will continue to be a great help in this area.

The new image of the Church has appeared, and it is as inspiring as the work of the Vatican Council itself. An era of change has burst forth in Brazil and in its neighbors. In fact,

the characteristic of the whole new Latin-American society is embodied in that one word, change. All the social structures and human activities are affected as the population changes from a predominantly rural society into an urban one. The Church must lead the changes in Brazil and Latin America, and there is a need for deep and lasting social changes. Low incomes, illiteracy, hunger, infant mortality, scandalous distribution of land and profits, plus an oppressive government--all add up to a social explosion. And the Church is in the vanguard of the social upheaval taking place. Only time will tell if it is to be successful in its efforts of reform. If it is not successful, Brazil will probably abandon her Christian past entirely in favor of a Communist structure. Or there will be a gentle descent into some sort of universal agnosticism and rejection of any moral code. The United States does not want Brazil to fall to the Communists, and the Church does not want either of those calamities to befall its people.

Modern life has caught up with Brazil, and changes are occurring in ten to twenty years that took Europe and the United States two centuries or more. The Catholic Church faces this revolution in a very unfavorable structural situation. The traditional means for evangelization were generally effective for the early Portuguese missionaries, but today the channels once used to transmit the basic ideas of Christianity have also

suffered deep social and cultural changes. There was a time when the institutions of society, such as the family, school and public authority, seemed to reinforce the teaching of the parish priest. Social controls caused a certain stability in patterns of behavior. All of the people seemed to be Catholic and follow the Church's moral code--or be in danger of being labeled a social or religious rebel.

There has been change there, too. The Church, as Church, is no longer in the majority in the true sense, even though it has a major influence. The Church must work in competition with other norms, values, attitudes and opinions, for example, those emanating from secularism and communism.

The Church has had the courage to face realities, slowly in some areas, to be sure, but nevertheless it is facing the critical social problems that are at the root of the matter. Because of this courage on the part of Latin American bishops and priests, as well as on the part of the many active and interested laymen, the signs of hope and success are breaking through. In 1955 the Bishops of Latin America formed CELAM (for Consejo Episcopal Latino-Americano), their Council. This committee has functions like those of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in the United States. Currently CELAM is in the hands of three strongly progressive Brazilian bishops, who follow firmly in the tradition of a more fiery and better known colleague, Dom Helder Camara of Recife in the Northeast section of

Brazil. In Brazil itself there is the Central Committee of the National Bishops' Conference (CNBB) which had its first meeting in February, 1969, in response to the very critical military-political situation existing under the Medici regime. The importance of these two committees cannot be underestimated, and their educational and social, as well as political influence is felt in Brazil and all of the countries of Latin America.

The Church is one of the few organizations which can work and communicate with the masses and at the same time have access, not always cordial, to the individuals at the top of the power structure. It is the only hope of the people, in the final analysis, especially of the poor people, the 80% who can do nothing about their lot in life. It is then, the only hope of the nation itself, and what it says and does should be of great concern to the United States and any other country that has vital or strong interests in Brazil.

The Catholic Church in Latin America generally has had a tradition of tolerance and of being basically apolitical, while at the same time having the reputation of favoring the status quo. In any event, the Church is usually criticized if it does not "speak up" and criticized even more when it does take a stand on social or other issues.

The Church is definitely taking a stand today in Brazil. It is not longer a victim of passivity, with the result that men are becoming very interested in religion again as something of which

to be proud. The antagonism between the intelligentsia and religion has disappeared. Youth, represented for the most part by the student elements, is no longer indifferent. Rather than decaying as some might think, the Church in Brazil is in a period of dynamic rebirth and development. Certainly there are some divisions in the Church, even among the bishops, however this is not religious but a matter of being a conservative, radical or progressive.

The Brazilian people still have a strong, sometimes unexplainable, Catholic unity that the Communists cannot overcome and which makes the populace strong in the face of an oppressive government, especially with the Church behind them. There has arisen, over the past few decades, a middle-class Catholicism, concerned with national development and a more just and democratic society. This group, with the students and their societies, in addition to the "radical" priests who are active as partisans, gives great impetus to the present social foment in Brazil.

Communism has little chance of any great success in Brazil, thanks to an army which is prepared to cope with any guerrilla threat, and with the Catholic Church an everpresent and formidable enemy. Communists have taken advantage of what at times seems to be a commonality of purpose to team up with members of the Church, or give encouragement here and there, but again with little or no success. The influence of the Church in Brazil would be even greater with the assistance of more "foreign" priests and nuns,

but the government at this time would not encourage too great an increase in the Catholic clergy.

Where then does all of this lead? The people want change, the Church is fighting for change, but strangely enough, there is a United States supported military dictatorship that refuses to allow any change. The Brazilian army does not want to give up the power it enjoys, and meanwhile continues to attempt to convince American businessmen, diplomats and military personnel that the system of repression and intimidation is really only temporary and necessary because of the threat of "Communist subversion."

It cannot go on this way much longer and many people from various walks of life in Brazil are trying to affect a change. They have suffered and even died for their efforts, and this, too, includes some of the clergy. The Church is a dominant force behind the undercurrents that are bound in the end to produce a real change, and this may mean the overthrow of the type system that is running and ruining Brazil today.

The President, as mentioned earlier, had promised a change, and a return to a democratic form of government, but continues to excuse all repressive actions as necessary because of the threat of communism. The Church, among others willing to speak up, has suggested that things have been put in order, and that communism is no longer a threat; that it is time for a different and open political system, truly representing the people.

The Church will, it seems, back a revolution, but it does not want a bloody change. This might be up to the United States to decide, since it is still supporting the government that is using even immoral means of staying in power. The Church has let the world know what is going on in Brazil, so perhaps the communists will be the victor yet, if the United States does not take some measures soon to force the Medici regime to stick to its original promises and plans of allowing a democratic form of government to be chosen for Brazil.

In 1964 the United States ambassador was Lincoln Gordon. After the coup by the military he persuaded the Johnson administration to recognize the new regime even though its policies were not known completely. Dr. Gordon never raised his voice in protest over the purges, the tortures, the murders, the denial of rights to citizens, and because of his encouragement there followed massive quantities of US aid, loans, and investments for the victors.

Governor Nelson Rockefeller returned from his tour of Brazil in June 1969, without condemning a single act of violence perpetrated over the previous five years by the military government. Arms sales to Brazil as well as other support followed his report.

The Church, in spite of such discouraging facts, still encourages a nonviolent change, it can do little else. But it remains to be seen if the influence of the Church is enough to change the government

by its criticism, and that failing, will the influence of the Church be sufficient to prevent a bloody revolution?

It is difficult for the Church to support the United States and its interests when much of the aid from the North American neighbor is used to train police who are being used by the Brazilian government to harass, torture and suppress various elements of the society. If the Church can honestly use its influence for stability it will do so, but it will not lie to preserve the status quo. Acting within its limits, the Church can carry out programs for social and political betterment while criticizing injustice. The majority of the Catholic hierarchy in Brazil, with the sympathy and understanding of the Catholic world outside Brazil, view the Church's place as being in the vanguard of change, directing it along rational, nonviolent lines.

If the United States and other countries interested in Brazil, and interested in preventing any kind of a communist takeover, would listen to the Church through its international channels and at least investigate the charges, there certainly would be a change, and quickly, before drastic measures are taken locally. The Church is one of the biggest engines of change in Brazil, as in all of Latin America, and can contribute immensely toward an eventual pattern of stability. The United States can make this a faster

process by showing its interest in proper areas resulting in social reforms rather than in financial profits.

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