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PRIESTS
BE SENT TO
LATIN AMERICA?

By Bishop Eduardo Pironio

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The executive board of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (CAL) met in Rome, in its fifth annual meeting, June 18-21, 1969. Bishop Eduardo Pironio, secretary of CELAM, discussed for the board one of the pivotal questions affecting all who provide foreign assistance to the Church in Latin America. Here is an English translation of his talk, taken from the July issue of Mensaje Iberoamericano, in Madrid.

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SHOULD PRIESTS BE SENT TO LATIN AMERICA?

By Bishop Eduardo Pironio

In Latin America and elsewhere the question is being asked whether it makes sense to keep on sending Church personnel to our continent. The wisdom of sending this kind of aid is being questioned. The priests who have come to Latin America have, in general, done yeoman service by their generous pastoral work, but the charge is sometimes made that the influx of those priests artificially prolongs the crisis of the Latin American Church, with its increasing dearth of native vocations. Sending us these priests, it is said, merely postpones the basic solution, which must be to devise new pastoral structures and ways of priestly life. Besides, it is asserted, foreign help, in personnel or even money, makes for a kind of religious colonialism.

As a consequence, the sending societies—and to some extent the sending bishops, too—are asking: Should we continue to send priests? Are we helping or hurting the Latin American Church by our efforts to aid?

We at CELAM have been asked to provide an answer. People want to know, not the personal opinion of certain individuals on the facts and the underlying problem, not the views of certain sociologists, theologians and experts in pastoral work from our continent. They want CELAM itself to express the thought and the desire of the Latin American bishops.

Hence CELAM has sounded out the bishops. In mid-March we wrote to the president of each national episcopal conference, asking each one to obtain for us its opinion. In addition, we polled 70 bishops who were especially well informed on the subject. To help them we enclosed a questionnaire with four suggested questions, which they might follow or not in framing their replies:

1. What positive gains have you derived from the priests sent to you from abroad?
2. What negative factors kept them from full effectiveness?

3. Do you want to continue receiving priests from abroad? Is the reason your pastoral need—or lack of need—of them? Is the reason some theological one?

4. If you answered question 3 affirmatively, what suggestions do you have concerning the screening of personnel, their training, their integration into the diocesan pastoral plan?

Of the 22 national conferences, 8 have already replied. We also received about 100 replies from bishops answering as individuals.

I. THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE

1. The Latin American hierarchy recognizes all that is positive and valid, pastorally and theologically, in the proffered help of foreign personnel—priests, religious and laity—and wishes to express warm gratitude to the sending bishops, dioceses and organizations for their generous co-operation. Moreover, it earnestly desires that this help be continued and even augmented, so that the positive contributions may increase and negative aspects may be corrected by an improved selection, training and follow-up of the individuals involved.

2. The Latin American hierarchy in general (with a few exceptions who judge that *any* foreign assistance, even money, merely puts off the basic solution) does not believe that the sending of foreign priests has artificially prolonged the crisis of the Church in Latin America, or that it has led to neglect of native vocations, or that it has held up the fundamental solution to its problems, or that it has promoted a kind of religious colonialism.

On the other hand, it does admit to certain specific mistakes, which we shall discuss below. It likewise recognizes that in a few cases Latin American bishops may have leaned too heavily on the ease of finding priests abroad, rather than devising new pastoral techniques, agencies and structures that would be less clerical and more truly ecclesial.

3. The Latin American hierarchy realizes it must face up squarely to finding a definitive solution to its problems. For our Church cannot go on indefinitely depending on outside churches. It must itself be responsible—this is the meaning of true advance in the Church, of its regenerative catholicity—for its own destiny and even become sooner or later a source of help for other Churches, e.g., in Africa or Asia.

It should look forward to having its own pastoral plan some day, its own personnel and its own structures and procedures. Foreign personnel should regard themselves as coming—this is in itself a valid reason for their presence—to help reveal the vital energies of our Church and to facilitate the creation of authentically Latin American pastoral programs.

These objectives deserve the earnest attention of our bishops, as well as serious efforts of competent theologians and experts in pastoral work.

II. POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PRIESTLY AID

1. The most immediate advantage is the sheer numerical presence of the priests. This has made possible the evangelization of religiously underprivileged areas, the establishment of the visible Church in mission lands, the preservation and development of the faith (even its resurrection in some places), the building and revitalizing of parishes and similar communities, the training of candidates for the priesthood, the care of specific pastoral sectors (students, workers, rural dwellers), the dividing up of dioceses and parishes to more manageable size, and the freeing of native-born priests who can then devote themselves to creating a truly Latin American pastoral program.

Many regions would soon be thoroughly dechristianized without the active presence of foreign personnel. In some dioceses the dearth of priests is extreme, and despite the best will and efforts of the bishop there seems little likelihood that native vocations can be found. The fall-off in vocations—the problem seems to be almost world-wide—is due to a variety of causes that we cannot analyze here.

2. Foreign priests make a peculiar contribution also for the general renewal of the Latin American Church. The valiant presence of certain priests from abroad, in fraternal communion with indigenous priests, has brought about a new vitality to the biblical, liturgical and catechetical fields and to our theological and pastoral thinking. It is readily seen that the thought and the experiences of other Churches enrich our own, provided we strive to avoid merely transplanting bodily and importing unchanged the methods that have worked well elsewhere. These new additions help to identify and strengthen one's own energies and to

wed successfully what is particular with what is universal, what is new with what is traditional.

3. The coming of priests from abroad allows us to meet truly apostolic, self-sacrificing priests, generous and devoted, sincere and eager to serve, fully integrated in the local community and with affection for its people. In some cases their integration has gone so far that they have adopted the citizenship of their new country and have been chosen by their colleagues to fill key positions.

4. They are also a living reminder to us of the universal community. They exemplify priestly collegiality and charity between dioceses. They illustrate by their presence how the Church, though it is bound to no one culture, embraces all peoples.

III. NEGATIVE ASPECTS TO PRIESTLY AID

1. The first such aspect is the indefinite continuation of our religious dependence. That is to say, we Latin American bishops must not relax because the principal pastoral posts are filled. We must not fail to search seriously for a definitive solution. Even when the aid is truly required, we must constantly remind ourselves that it is temporary and only supplementary, although it will always be true that the Church is a missionary one and there should always be mutual contacts within it.

2. There has not always been complete integration of foreign personnel in the pastoral programs of Latin America. Often this has occurred because the receiving country or diocese has no pastoral plan. We improvise too much; we tend not to formulate precise goals. As a consequence, foreign priests are sometimes used just to fill holes, without any over-all pastoral planning, and they consequently feel confused, frustrated and misplaced. Sometimes, too, foreign priests are not integrated into the native Church because the local clergy does not welcome them.

Some foreign priests are not integrated, of course, because of their own cockiness, assurance and airs of superiority, which make them seem conquistadors or imperialists. Thus they never seriously try to adapt personally and pastorally. They just transplant and import ideologies and their own methods that clash with Latin American ways. They stubbornly cling to prefabricated

apostolic notions and are quite unable to appreciate, much less assimilate, the local culture.

This lack of integration can be noted on three different levels: that of the local clergy, that of the whole Catholic community, and that of the people in general. These newcomers make no effort to sense the peculiar rhythm of life in Latin America, the mentality, and in some cases even the language, thus making difficult the prophetic ministry of the word, so necessary today among us. They fail too to become acquainted with our history, our folkways, our geography and our religious past.

The sending of teams, of groups that work together, is a great boon not only for those priests but for their pastoral effectivity, too. Such a practice is especially desirable when they are "natural" teams, i.e., made up of priests who have already been working together for some time. But they run the risk of turning into closed groups, hard to be integrated, or even pressure groups that insist on doing things their way.

Full integration is made difficult, likewise, by the transient nature of the help. The practice of coming under three- or five-year contracts has certain drawbacks: the priest never settles down, and projects that cannot be carried through in those few years tend to be dropped by those who take the initiator's place.

The priest's own personality can also be a negative factor in his success. Sometimes he suffers from personal problems or tensions, or is immature humanly or psychically. His new surroundings, far from helping him solve his problems, only exacerbate them. His immaturity comes to the surface because he was too young and inexperienced when sent or because he never really faced up to the question of his vocation.

Some priests turn out not to have a solid spirituality, to be lacking in supernatural vision, evangelical humility and a responsible willingness to obey. They are often at odds with the bishop. The fault is not always exclusively theirs, for they are bound, at times, to run up against mentalities that are set against change and dialogue. But even then, these priests are self-opinionated and incapable of teamwork, and reveal an impatience and an unwillingness to wait that are hardly in keeping with the gospel spirit.

A number of priests, too, come eager to engage in activities that, for various ecclesiastic or civil reasons, they could not succeed in at home. Some of them have an exclusively social apostolic purpose, tinged with revolutionary romanticism, so that they become involved in projects that ill befit them. Often enough this has led to grave conflicts, not only in the ecclesiastical but in the civil order. They must be told clearly, therefore, the proper scope of the priest's role and the limits to this involvement in secular matters. Besides, the foreign priest who gets into the socio-economic activities of his adopted country is always handicapped.

Yet others come with avant-garde theological notions or with extremely advanced methods that they try to impose forthwith on a people not yet ready for them. A certain preliminary pedagogy is required in these matters.

IV. LOOKING AHEAD

These negative factors in certain candidates have seriously pre-occupied some of the Latin American bishops, so that they react with hesitance or fear or even pessimism before asking for priestly aid. Some admit frankly that they are now loath to ask for such help. Others, though they concede they need help, decide that on balance they won't ask for it now because the disadvantages outweigh the advantages it would bring to the morale of their dioceses. Obviously, these are very special and particular situations.

And yet almost all the bishops have stressed, as a matter of principle, the usefulness of such help and even the necessity for it, in order to care for specialized movements (campus ministry, workers, rural areas, etc.), to foster genuine Catholic communities, and to stimulate family and youth groups so native vocations will be forthcoming.

Admitting the need for such help, at least for some years, certain bishops expressed a number of qualifications regarding the selection, training and integration of foreign personnel.

1. *Selection.* This is the key matter. Wherever there are negative factors, they are invariably the result of a faulty original selection. It is not enough that candidates are willing or eager to

come. Conversely, whenever these priests have succeeded, they did so because there had been, on the part of both the bishops and both the dioceses, a thorough knowledge of the candidate and a careful selection.

a) The selection must investigate:

- His human and psychic maturity, his balance. No priest with inner problems to resolve should come. None too young or too short on pastoral experience: in general, he should be 30 years old and have had at least 5 years of ministry.
- His genuine missionary motivation. He should have a deep sense of what the Church is, and a desire to keep in touch with his bishop and fellow priests. He should esteem poverty and service of others. He should be solid in doctrine and steady in his sacerdotal spirituality. In a word, he should be priestly.
- His ability to adapt and be fully integrated. He should be able to contribute on his own without denying or destroying what others have contributed, to respect local values and strive to make them even stronger, to devise new pastoral techniques without jettisoning old ones.

b) The sending bishop should be the one who makes the selection, but he should act in concert with the receiving bishop, and they should previously have discussed together thoroughly the requirements of the receiving diocese. The priests' senate of the home diocese ought to agree to the selection too, so that the entire sending diocese will feel responsible and involved with both the candidate and his new diocese. Finally, the advice of competent priests, doctors and psychiatrists should be sought to corroborate the choice.

c) The selection should consider the historical, socio-economic and ecclesial conditions of the country where the priest will go, and also his specific work. His going should meet a concrete need (e.g., for specialists in theology, pastoral planning, campus ministry, workers' groups), and not simply be to plug empty holes.

d) Finally, the selection should look for quality more than quantity. With a true sense of the whole Church's good,

the sending bishop should choose the very best of his clergy, sacrificing what he could best use himself.

2. *Training.* Even for the best candidates, this is a crucial matter if tensions, painful let-downs and a sense of frustration are not to result. Even after a solid general preparation in theology, spirituality and pastoral techniques, a specific training is also required.

a) Such training should envisage:

— the best possible mastery of the language

— acquaintance with the country's history and culture, its particular customs and attitudes, its social and economic situation, the religious conditions

— the general pastoral goals pursued by the country or diocese he will serve

b) As much as possible, this training should be provided by highly competent Latin Americans, in national or regional institutes, or in some cases in continent-wide institutes such as the Instituto de Pastoral Latinoamericano (IPLA), in Ecuador. In general, however, we urge that the training be given locally and within the framework provided by CELAM.

c) The training should enable them to

— form earnest, involved laymen

— vitalize various apostolic movements

— establish and inspire parish and other basic communities

— develop, in collaboration with their local colleagues, theological and pastoral ideas for making their pastoral activities truly efficient.

3. *Integration.* This goal must always be kept in view. It will anticipate later tensions or failures. It will not be difficult to achieve provided the personnel have been carefully selected and realistically trained.

a) There can be no integration, obviously, unless the receiving diocese has been prepared. It must be a truly unified clergy with a precise over-all pastoral program. The bishop

should be clear in his own mind as to what he expects of the foreign priests.

- b) The sending bishop also—and the sending diocese—must feel responsible for the candidate's success. They should keep in touch with him, encourage him, make him feel they are backing him. Should he for some reason have to return to his diocese, he ought not return home feeling a stranger.
- c) This integration should take place on three levels:
 - with the clergy. He should find a fraternal community with the native priests. Together, and in union with the bishop, they should work out the imaginative pastoral program they will follow. All should feel they are the Lord's disciples; no one should set himself up as "master."
 - with the whole Christian community. He should have genuine liking for the people entrusted to him, a respect for the values they esteem, with no attempt to impose on them an alien culture, however valid it might be, and without any impatience for immediate results or even for immediate elimination of existing evils.
 - with the people in general. He must identify with the world he lives in, take on its mentality and master its language. He should understand its dreams and its disappointments, involve himself in priestly fashion in its search for total human development. Obviously, he should not become involved in matters that belong properly to the laity.

V. THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION OF PRIESTLY AID

At this point a theological reflection is called for on what has been said about the positive and negative aspects of priestly aid and on what the future of such aid promises. Theology must explain facts and illuminate action. Only thus can we really answer the question: how does the Latin American hierarchy look on the sending of foreign priests?

1. It considers their coming as essentially justified and even required by the very nature of the Church, as Christ founded it to be the universal sacrament of salvation. It welcomes such help, therefore, not only because it has pressing needs but also because the help is theologically warranted.

Ours is an essentially missionary Church. Throughout its pilgrim course, from the Lord's ascension to His Parousia, the whole Church feels "sent" by the Son and spurred by the grace and charity of the Spirit to preach the gospel of salvation to all peoples and all classes of men.

It is in the light of this universal mission of the Church that we must look on any sending of personnel for establishing or fomenting the growth of new churches. It is not a question of strategy or of use of superfluity. It is a question of the nature of the Church and the mandate of our Lord. Until the day when He hands over the Kingdom to His Father, the entire Church is pressed to divest itself, to "send." It would not otherwise be the Church of Christ, whom the Father sent.

The Church is also a humanity-wide communion in the one Christ. In Him there is no longer Jew nor gentile, slave nor freedman. We are all called to the same destiny. In this sense, there are in the Church no "foreign" priests. "Christ and the Church, which bears witness to Him by preaching the gospel, transcend every particularity of race or nation and cannot be considered foreign anywhere or to anybody" (Vat. II, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity). This "ecclesial communication" totally excludes both exaggerated nationalism and the colonizing spirit. All of us make up the one Church of Christ.

The Church's responsibility for the entire People of God is corporate. Sharing of its resources—its personnel included—is thus a natural and essential obligation. "All bishops are consecrated not just for some one diocese, but for the salvation of the entire world. . . . Individual churches carry a responsibility for all the others" (*Ibid.*, n. 38). Each church is to find the supernatural courage to release at least some of its most highly qualified and needed personnel. To release only mediocre individuals, or to wait for some future date when more priests are available would show a lack of trust in God, as well as offend against ecclesial communion itself.

Episcopal collegiality means, in practice, that every bishop, as a member of the episcopal college and a legitimate successor of the apostles, should be conscious of that solicitude for the universal Church that Christ's precept and institution demand.

The aid it offers to other regions is also a sign of a church's

internal vitality and fecundity. It can be said to be full-grown not only when it flourishes internally by the faith and love of its members, but also when it shares its fruits for the evangelization of other groups and peoples.

2. But aid given abroad is justified only if that energy contributes to founding, fostering and bringing to full flower indigenous churches, that is to say, it should not paralyze their own native dynamism, but rather help them to maturity. The catholicity of the Church requires of each local church that it share its resources. "In virtue of this catholicity each individual part of the Church contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church. Thus through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase" (Vat. II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 13). The very unity of the Church thus prompts us to bring to full growth the native diversity of local churches.

This presupposes that foreign priests who come to Latin America should be possessed of intuition and creativity. They should come, not as spokesmen for alien cultures, but as prophets of the home culture; not as importers of prefabricated pastoral methods, but as co-inspirers with the native clergy of an authentically Latin American pastoral approach.

Fully aware of what their home church has to contribute, they should bring it, joyfully and simply. At the same time, though, they should feel satisfaction in discovering the virtues of their adopted church—and humility enough to make those virtues their own and cultivate them. The purpose behind sending priests abroad is to help other churches grow to spiritual maturity and find the strength to share their own fruits still further. It is in this sense, then, we will have proof that the assistance given to our Latin American Church, in personnel and in money, was truly justified, when we find ourselves some day able to assist the churches that helped us—or other churches in even greater need.

3. We come now to our own Latin American responsibility. Aid from overseas strengthens us but also puts us under an obligation to the universal Church. We must not always be receiving. Indeed, the surest sign of maturity—and help toward maturity, too—is a willingness to give. Hence, in virtue of the same ecclesial

intercommunion that others showed for us, we should learn how to share aid among ourselves: from one diocese of a country to another and from one country of Latin America to another.

The Latin American Church must devise its own new pastoral method. Till now we have built it too much around the priest. In view of the growing lack of priests (indeed, the future will see the shortage grow even more acute), we must invent new ways and build our pastoral plan of the future on the basis of fewer priests, of having married deacons, of using pastorally active nuns and responsible, zealous laymen. All our ministries will have to be re-examined. The prophetic conscience of the whole People of God must be stirred.

In our planning we must rely on the help of competent theologians, possibly Latin Americans, possibly not, who will examine the needs of our Church from a Latin American perspective, under the guidance of the Spirit and the trustworthy tutelage of the Church's magisterium. Most of all, though, we must count on the generous collaboration of our bishops, their inmost thoughts and their supernatural daring.

4. Finally, we must respond theologically to two troublesome problems.

a) How does it happen that the Latin American Church, so generously evangelized by missionaries from abroad, is still, after several centuries, religiously poor and dependent?

The answer is not simple. First of all, Latin America's internal needs multiplied even as its population grew. Quite apart from its demographic explosion, the waves of immigrants complicated the difficulties of providing a proper evangelization. In this sense, more than one country (e.g., Italy and Spain) should feel especially obligated toward its sons and daughters who emigrated to our continent, and should send more of its priests to take care of them.

Second, the evangelization was not always done in a thorough way. The gospel message was not put across fully and dynamically. Sometimes people were merely given an immediate preparation for the essential sacraments; the gospel was not presented vividly so as to engage the people's enthusiasm. The prophetic function, in its genuine sense, was never at all accepted.

Finally—and this is our fault—we have not given generously enough. Overwhelmed by our poverty, we failed completely to grasp our missionary responsibility. We relaxed, turning over vast territories to foreign missionaries, and forgetting that those territories were our responsibility. At times we were not heroic or self-abnegated enough to send out our own priests as missionaries to other dioceses or countries. And yet every church, even the poorest, is essentially a missionary church.

b) Why do many foreign priests among us undergo the painful sensation of futility and frustration in their ministry? Why, when they return to their homes, are they skeptical and pessimistic about the utility of sending priests?

Again, the answer is not easy. There are, as we mentioned above, a number of strictly personal problem cases: priests who have not yet understood their function as priests and have become, often with the highest motivation, social leaders.

At the same time it is also undeniable that the Latin American hierarchy has not always provided these priests the scope they need for their work. Either we had no pastoral plan in which they could integrate their priestly zeal, or we did not have enough supernatural initiative to seek out with those priests the new apostolic ventures the Lord expected of us. These ventures would aid in building a Latin American Church that could enrich by its evangelical diversity the unity of the universal Church.

These past shortcomings must not deter us. Our goal must be to admit our failings in order gradually to correct them. Above all we must discover, in the true spirit of poverty and interior generosity, what the Lord is asking us to do today and strive to fulfill His request fully.

In conclusion, then:

1. The Latin American hierarchy esteems and is grateful for, needs and requests priestly help from abroad.

2. At the same time, in fraternal unity with its fellow bishops of other lands, it asks for a more careful selection, more realistic training and fuller integration of those priests.

3. Before the Lord and His universal Church, the Latin Ameri-

can hierarchy promises to search, with the wise and generous assistance of foreign priests, for a definitive solution to its own problems.

4. Only thus will the Latin American Church, which today offers itself to the world as a solid hope, be able to fulfill its salvific destiny and become, by the maturity of its fruits, the true light of the peoples.

