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## Religion and the Sciences

### Opportunities and Challenges

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## 6. Inquiry for Action

### The Latin American Church and the Social Sciences Post Vatican II

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#### Introduction

Vatican II's Apostolic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (Paul VI), was the longest and arguably definitive statement about the new role of the Catholic Church in the world. Largely due to its new commitment to justice, the “sciences” and methods of inquiry formerly condemned as grave errors were finally embraced. In particular, how the Church engaged the world would now require knowledge of that world, a knowledge not provided by philosophy, theology, grammar, rhetoric, or logic. Thus *Gaudium et spes* states, “In pastoral care, sufficient use must be made not only of theological principles, but also of the findings of the secular sciences, especially of psychology and sociology, so that the faithful may be brought to a more adequate and mature life of faith” (12).

Later in that document under a section titled “The Circumstances of Culture in the World Today,” the Church was aware that if it were to minister to human beings effectively, it needed to embrace the “new” in terms of methods and disciplines that were previously suspect. Thus it states:

Hence the culture of today possesses particular characteristics: sciences which are called exact greatly develop critical judgment; the more recent psychological studies more profoundly explain human activity; historical studies make it much easier to see things in their mutable and evolutionary aspects, customs and usages are becoming more and more uniform; industrialization, urbanization, and other causes which promote community living create a mass-culture from which are born new ways of thinking, acting and making use of leisure (54).

### Application Post-Vatican II

The average Roman Catholic in the United States would have thought the major changes stemming from Vatican II were largely liturgical and perhaps ecclesial in terms of how the local parish began to function in a new way. Few North American Catholics know or understand that a radically new way of engaging the world was called for at Vatican II. This way is generally captured by the body of works known as Catholic Social Thought. Anecdotally, I can state that after fifteen years of teaching Catholic Social Thought at the university level, I still have students approach me after class and ask in a worried whisper, “Why haven’t I heard about this stuff before?”

The same could not be said of large parts of Latin America, a region whose bishops quickly embraced their particular commitment to addressing structural sin by using social analysis to understand the world to which they ministered. This was essential for a move from a charity model to a justice model of engagement with the world and its problems. A charity model engaged the world by meeting the immediate needs of those suffering or in poverty; a justice model examines and addresses the *causes* of the suffering and poverty. In what follows I will indicate how the Latin American Conference of Bishops (CELAM) moved very quickly to encourage these new approaches, as early as 1968 at their Second General Conference in Medellín, Colombia. I will then provide a unique example of their application in the ministry of the first Jesuit martyr in El Salvador, Rutilio Grande, S.J.

It would be instructive to begin our reflection on Medellín with a quick sampling of the initial commitments made by the bishops – please note how all of them require a detailed knowledge of societal structures and how they work.

- To inspire, encourage and press for a new order of justice that incorporates all persons in the decision-making of their own communities;
- To promote the constitution and the efficacy of the family, not only as a human sacramental community, but also as an intermediate structure in function of social change;
- To make education dynamic in order to accelerate the training of mature persons in their current responsibilities;

- To encourage the professional organizations of workers, which are decisive elements in socio-economic transformation;
- To promote a new evangelization and intensive catechesis that reaches the elite and the masses in order to achieve a lucid and committed faith;
- To renew and create new structures in the church that institutionalize dialogue and channel collaboration between bishops, priests, religious, and laity (CELAM 1968: Preface)

Given these very concrete commitments, it was essential that pastoral workers in the church begin to learn the sciences that would make such commitments possible. In the eighth document at Medellín titled “Formation of Clerics,” exposure to the social sciences is explicitly encouraged in the section titled “Intellectual Formation” (CELAM 1968). “Today more than ever it is urgent that we update our studies in accord with the orientation of the Council, insisting on those aspects that concern most particularly the actual situation of the continent.”<sup>1</sup> In particular the Latin American bishops called for deepening the study of the social sciences when they stated, “A particular importance should be given to the study and investigation of our Latin American realities in their religious, social, anthropological and psychological aspects.”<sup>2</sup> Seminary education would also change as the bishops realized the necessity of collaborating with those in disciplines outside the traditional seminary curriculum. “As teachers, providing for the training of future professors, we must update their education through meetings, courses and institutes at the national and Latin American level, by searching for collaboration with professors who specialize in different fields and who can lend their expertise in service to different centers.”<sup>3</sup> The message from the bishops was very clear, they must engage the social sciences if they were to understand and minister effectively to their people.

The embodiment of this new approach from Medellín was found in the Pastoral Institute for Latin America (IPLA) based in Quito, Ecuador, which combined training in pastoral theology with service to the lived ministry of the church (Cardenal: 193). Initially, IPLA was conceived as a travelling team of pastoral teachers who would move throughout Latin America giving workshops on pastoral leadership. In 1968, it was transformed into an institute based in Quito, Ecuador, in association with the Latin American Conference of Bishops. Two bishops were instrumental in the formation and identity of this institute: Manuel Larraín, bishop of Talca, Chile; and Leónidas Proaño, bishop of Riobamba, Ecuador.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hoy más que nunca es urgente actualizar los estudios de acuerdo con las orientaciones del Concilio, insistiendo en aquellos aspectos que atañen más particularmente a la situación actual del continente” (16).

<sup>2</sup> “Desde una importancia particular al estudio e investigación de nuestras realidades latinoamericanas en sus aspectos religioso, social, antropológico y psicológico” (18).

<sup>3</sup> “En cuanto al profesorado, prevista la capacitación de los futuros profesores, hay que procurar actualizarlo por medio de encuentros, cursos e institutos de alcance nacional y latinoamericano, buscando además la colaboración de profesores especializados, que puedan prestar sus servicios en los diferentes centros” (19).

At the inaugural ceremony of IPLA in 1968, Bishop Proaño named the objective of IPLA as the capacity to determine a pastoral strategy for Latin America adequate to its circumstances and necessities. Thus, the primary focus of IPLA was to discover and know the Latin American reality with clarity and objectivity. (Cardenal: 193). After coming to know the reality within which one was working, theological reflection could then lead to pastoral planning and implementation. The goal was to transmit a spirit “that would lead with the audacity and creativity of the Holy Spirit” (Cardenal: 193).

Candidates for IPLA, both lay and ordained, had studied theology and had at least five years of pastoral experience in Latin America. The program opened with a course on the reality of Latin America with a focus on its socio-economic and cultural dimensions. Later, candidates studied theology with an eye towards the “signs of the times,” the secularization of faith and other ideologies. Following the path set forth by Vatican II, participants studied with special interest the relationship between the church and society, with a concentration on the Christian perspective on change, revolutions, violence, liberation theology, and socio-political implications of pastoral work. This is certainly what *Gaudium et spes* had in mind when it argued for the use of the secular sciences, especially psychology and sociology (62; Cardenal: 193).

The vision of the church emerging from IPLA stressed the following themes: the church and the kingdom of God; salvation and the visible church; the church as sacrament, communion, and context; the theological and pastoral sense of ministers; the laity, pastoral ministers and consecrated life; and base Christian communities. All of these themes come directly from the documents of Vatican II as well as the Medellín conference.

Students at IPLA engaged in a process of education and formation that was more than simply an academic exercise. Participants engaged in important pastoral experiences, intense community life, teamwork, and liturgical celebrations, all of which gave an experience of the Latin American church. To fulfill the first level of work, participants completed research directed by professors of anthropology and sociology on a small community. Additionally, students assumed responsibility for the direction of the course by organizing workshops and seminars. To conclude this section of the course, students, either individually or as a team, created a pastoral booklet (Cardenal: 194). This approach and the type of formation it encouraged were the inspirations and visions of one of its founders, Bishop Proaño of Ecuador.

What was Bishop Proaño’s vision for the Latin American church that formed so many pastoral workers in the 1970s and 80s? Fortunately, there is an excellent source for determining this. In December of 1975, Proaño published an article in *Búsqueda*, the journal of the Pastoral Commission for the Archdiocese of San Salvador, titled “The Role of Christianity in the Process of Development.” Because the pastoral institute directed by Proaño shared a significant portion of his understanding of Latin America, a brief analysis of this contribution is useful here.

Proaño divided his piece into 3 parts: (1) the reality of people in Latin America, (2) the Christian message of liberation, and (3) Christian engagement and development. He treated each part from four different perspectives, the first in relation to God, the second in relation to the world, the third in relation to people, and the fourth in relation to history. By

reframing and re-presenting the Christian understanding of reality in this context, Proaño demonstrated how one's faith can be present to God, the world, other people, and even to how we understand history.

### Reality of People in Latin America

Proaño first utilized sociological data by acknowledging two types of believers in Latin America and, therefore, two churches. The first were the elites or the oligarchy described as “traditional conservatives [who] have made a *separation between their faith and social responsibility*. The faith, for them, is adherence to a creed and clear, determinate moral principles. This type of traditional faith is especially conscious of one's status in the church, and they want to serve their own social, economic and political interests” (Proaño: 7).<sup>4</sup> The other side of this is what Proaño terms “revolutionary faith.” “Revolutionary faith is more than a personal relationship with God, it is a social responsibility. For this group, actions of service to one's neighbor substitute for prayer and liturgy. Their crisis of faith emerges when they do not see the hierarchical Church seriously committed to social problems and the poor” (Proaño: 8). The danger for this group is the temptation to abandon the church and, out of frustration, embrace Marxist movements. There is a small group between these two oppositional movements whom Proaño names “developmentalists.” Their problem is a growing religious indifferentism. This very brief analysis of “believers” in Latin America communicates an awareness of different sub-groups within Catholicism. This analysis continues with a stab at a kind of cultural anthropological understanding of the indigenous poor that tries to understand the general failure of Christianity to enculturate itself into indigenous worldviews.

Proaño saw that among the vast majority of Latin Americans – the poor common people – a type of popular religiosity that understood the Christian faith as “deformed and mixed with native religious practices where the Christian faith becomes almost tyrannical; there is the danger of being influenced by superstition and magic which reveal something utilitarian but also a fear of the divine” (Proaño: 8). When pagan influences, especially from nature religions, become mixed with Christianity, faith becomes hostile to human existence. At the same time it is recognized that these popular manifestations “emerge from authentic religiosity, and can be expressed through culturally appropriate elements which are available (Proaño: 8). Enculturation and syncretism were, and continue to be, extremely difficult cultural challenges to Christianity in Latin America. This brief overview of Latin Americans and their religious orientation illustrates the great variety and complexity of religious identity in this region.

Because of the diversity of religious perspectives, the world and how the people of Latin America related to it differed as well. This was especially true of indigenous peasants who existed very close to the land and for whom the earth itself was like a mother, “she gives them food, she feeds the animals, provides the material for their clothing and she lovingly covers them when they die” (Proaño: 8). These same people, peasants throughout Latin America, had not yet discovered their productive capacities for a variety of reasons. First,

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<sup>4</sup> This understanding of traditional conservatives derives from a document from the Medellín Conference titled, “Pastoral Theology of the Elites.”

they used antiquated technology to farm. They also lacked both the capacity and initiative for innovation in producing the items they sold. They could mimic outsiders who came in and innovated, but for some reason the capacity to innovate rarely came from them (Caraman: 222). According to Proaño, what was lacking in their quest for simple survival was a vision for understanding the world “as God’s instrument for human beings to realize their integral growth” (Proaño: 9). Oppressed peoples will imitate but not initiate, because that requires freedom and safety. While crude, what is evident in Proaño’s approach is a combination of sociology, anthropology, and cultural psychology through which he attempts to understand the peoples of Latin America.

Proaño points out great injustices in the relationships between and among peoples. Social indicators revealed that the most fundamental human relationship, the family, was deeply and negatively affected. He states, “. . . the family suffers in a special way from the serious consequences of underdevelopment: bad conditions of life and formal education, a poor level of health, a low capacity for change, conditions from which transformation cannot be realized adequately” (Proaño: 9).

Additionally, specific cultural factors are unique to Latin America, including *machismo*, which is often revealed through male infidelity and results in a high number of illegitimate children.<sup>5</sup> Infidelity is a key factor in what Proaño terms the “demographic explosion” that resulted in a number of social disorders, exacerbating other social problems. As a result, the family was not the intended “social nucleus that promotes love and understanding, help, respect, freedom and personal growth, and a common spirit.” Instead, it often became “the place of domination, exploitation, oppression, deceit, neglect – a reflection of the social system in which we live” (Proaño: 9). The family failed to educate children in an integral way, so it was left to educational structures of the state to assume that duty.

In addition to oppression by the upper social classes, there was also “outside domination.” “Multinational businesses are taking the wealth of Latin American countries and, as a result, the gap between economically developed countries and economically underdeveloped countries is widening” (Proaño: 9). What resulted from all of this structural oppression – familial, educational, economic and international – was the “temptation to retaliation, to struggle, and to violence” (Proaño: 11). This generally characterized human relations in Latin America.

Finally, in relationship to history, the peoples of Latin America needed to re-imagine the purpose and end of human history. This process of re-imagining was particularly difficult to implement because of the long history of oppression and repression against native peoples that resulted in what Proaño terms a “special psychology of the oppressed.” These marginalized peoples were a special focus of the Medellín document:

Their ignorance is inhuman bondage. Their liberation is a responsibility of all Latin American people. They ought to be liberated from prejudice and superstition, from their complexes and inhibitions, from their fanaticism, from their fatalism, from their fearful incomprehension of the world in

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<sup>5</sup> This is one of the few references to *machismo* and the damage it does that I have ever seen in regard to social reality as understood by the church of Latin America.

which they live, from their lack of confidence and from their passivity (CELAM 1968).

What especially concerned Proaño was the fatalism resulting from a “psychology of oppression.” Events were attributed to the will of God because there was no hope or possibility of effective human agency in the world. Without those two components, a vision for how the world could be transformed was impossible. “They begin to believe that it is the will of God that established the existence of rich and poor, and for this reason, nothing can be done to change unjust structures. It is fatalism” (Proaño: 9).

In summary, Bishop Proaño offered a new Christian cosmology set in the Latin American context of oppression, but he did so through the lens of cultural psychology, anthropology, and social analysis. He was faithful to the core doctrines of Christianity (such as creation, original sin, incarnation, redemption, and sanctification) and yet he applied these creatively and constructively to his own social, political, and economic situation. Far from the distant universalizing of abstract theology, he proposed a Christianity of particularity, faithful to the tradition received and responsive to the world it served. Proaño’s call for conscientization over traditional methods of education was vital to understanding how the church in Latin America initially responded to the call to evangelize for integral development with the aid of social sciences.

As a student at IPLA for five months in 1972, Rutilio Grande, S.J. used this approach to ministry to analyze the violent consequences of deep inequality within his own context. How he came to understand his context became critical to how he responded to it.

### **Rutilio Grande, S.J. in Context**

In an article titled “Violence and the Social Situation,” Rutilio begins with the following:

It is often said by some that the priest should not get involved in economic or social matters. If he does, he will be called a communist. They will give the following reasons: if you are an engineer you shouldn’t get involved with morality, in the same way a priest should not involve himself in economic or social matters. But the comparison is not valid, for while technical things pertain to the engineer and the economist, etc., social and economic realities are necessary to be human, they pertain to all people, and are thus a part of morality (1970: 369).

In his evaluation of parish reality during his effort to serve in Aguilares, El Salvador, Rutilio argued that effective ministry was predicated upon first bringing together various forms of data to be analyzed critically. By this he meant various forms of sociological and anthropological data needed to be collected, analyzed, and interpreted in order to better understand both the macro and micro reality of the people being served. The analysis by Rutilio utilized the University of Central America and its Institute of Public Opinion and included a focus on the following realities: the geophysical, population issues, socioeconomic reality, the rural village, social stratification, worker-boss relationships, family situations, cultural and religious reality, and pastoral reality. Through a careful consideration of each, the pastoral team arrived at enough knowledge of the situation to adequately shape its

ministry. Rutilio exemplifies this “inquiry for action” in his analysis of his own context. My summary of his analysis follows.

The Lord of Mercy parish in Aguilares was founded in 1952 and covered 170 square kilometers (Grande 1975: 11). It inhabited the northern part of the department of San Salvador and was located on the Troncal Norte, the only paved road “crossing the plain from the South to the North.” Aguilares was joined to Suchitoto through an unpaved road served by various buses. The parish had 33,000 inhabitants spread throughout the city (pop. 10,000) as well as villages nearby, including El Paisnal (pop. 2,000).

The socioeconomic reality of the area reflected Aguilares and its location as a transportation crossroads within the country. The population consisted of “small commercial business people, simple skilled professions, and peasants who are piling up in the peripheral areas leading to the new neighborhoods and settlements that lack the most basic urban services (like water, sewer, electricity, etc.)” Market days transformed Aguilares from Thursday to Monday “into a motley confluence of diverse occupations and backgrounds” (Grande 1975: 12).

The area in and around Aguilares, the area the parish served, was dominated by landowners who inhabited more than thirty-five large estates. Sugarcane occupied most of the flat land that remained. The land not owned by the large estates, or used for sugarcane, was rocky terrain rented by peasants to grow subsistence corn. Ranches raising livestock were beginning to claim about half of that rocky land. Finally, “The three great mills of La Cabana, San Francisco and Colima, with some other sub-centers of less importance, temporarily absorb the peasant labor of the region which increases during harvest with workers and truckers from other areas” (Grande 1975: 11).

Social stratification was clear and socially significant. The highest level of the social strata was a group of property owners who lived in the capital city, San Salvador. Their intentions were paternalistic (they wanted to help in a way that was not sustainable), but in general they colluded with other landowners to “fatten” themselves at the cost of the peasant worker. Among the landlords who managed the actual farms in the area for the landowners, there were those engaged in sugarcane farming and those “for whom the mill is the single most significant business interest within the agricultural-industrial, trade and banking activities that manage the country” (Grande 1975: 11). The medium and small landlords taxed the profits on the mills and most were dedicated exclusively to agriculture. Many also supplemented their income through businesses in the city. Peasants, those on the bottom of the social ladder, had their huts and small pieces of land in order to “cover their sustenance.” Some took on temporary work in the mills and those who owned small shops were taxed from their trading with city merchants. Because their tiny pieces of land often did not provide sustenance, they rented “the rocky ground that cannot grow sugarcane for their own small farms.” The goal was to harvest enough to pay off the debts incurred by renting land, buying seed, and using fertilizer (Grande 1975: 13). Many peasants settled in the area who could not buy land for sustenance, and according to Rutilio, “they are basically slaves” because sugarcane was seasonal work and labor laws only covered full-time employees. Because of this, “evictions are becoming endemic because nobody wants to have unwanted people on their farms who could cause conflict.”

The relationship between bosses and workers in the area around Aguilares was one of “domination and exploitation.” This was so because the Salvadoran job code did not correspond to the reality on the ground. “Nearly all of it refers to the permanent worker, and jobs, outside of the rare case of the employers, are considered temporary” (Grande 1975: 13). Measures such as minimum wage and other rights were laughed at “because their interpretation always aligns with the interests of the employer.” While there was the appearance of a law, there were various ways to get around it, and employers did. Inspections by the Ministry of Labor, for example, “easily filter into the offices of the employers” so that changes could quickly be made allowing them to protect themselves. Those who came to speak to workers were met by workers who didn’t want to talk because they feared reprisals such as being fired or other abuse that would worsen their situation. Even if the peasant’s place of work was fined as punishment, in the end this money “will come from their own sweat.” Rutilio painted a grim portrait of the worker in El Salvador – a laborer with few rights in a system rigged to benefit owners.

In terms of family life, the mission team characterized it as “unstable, with high fertility and mortality rates and broken homes.” The basic necessities were absent – nutrition, health, electricity, water, sewer, and dignified housing – and unknown or not understood by those who lived outside of these communities. Over fifty percent of the population was under twenty-five years old, and the level of illiteracy was very high. On the whole, the people from around Aguilares were “enslaved by all these personal and environmental ills, marginalized progress, and historical actions done in the country.” For all of these reasons, they became easy victims of “sexism, alcoholism, prostitution and a high level of criminality.” Finally, the life of women was even more difficult: “If this could be said of human beings in general, it is the female peasant who suffers most when the men project their actions and frustrations upon them” (Grande 1975: 13).

Socio-culturally, the mission team saw oppression as well. The people of the area had neither voice nor the ability to express it; “they do not know how to ‘say their word.’” The expressions they did emulate were those imposed by the popular media in the city through radio and other propaganda. Because Aguilares was a crossroads of commerce in the country, the reality there “relegates all the cultural and religious traditions of their place of origin to second place.” Consequently, people could only rely on tradition which “weighs little in Aguilares.” This resulted in “ambivalence for the pastoral process” (Grande 1975: 14). Because people left their own cultural and religious traditions when they came to Aguilares, they lacked “the matrix that can feed and sustain their popular religiosity.” The result was that many became absorbed in what Rutilio called the “semi-pagan environment.”

Politically, people in the area of Aguilares understood the system to be a sideshow that they observed – it did not represent “an expression of their will or aspirations to achieve a better situation for everyone.” They feared the local police, obeyed even an oppressive local strongman and could “barely emerge from paternalistic or populist motivations.”

Religiously, according to the mission team, the church incorporated people into the scheme of oppression even if it did so unintentionally through an exploited-exploiter dualism. Rutilio articulated the situation in this way:

The priest has some knowledge and magical powers with which he is able to manipulate everyone. God is a capricious king with whom we must be content. His will is blamed for all that exists and happens and is something with which “we must still comply in all things.” To Him they go for certain needs and at certain times, like a pharmacy or a benefactor.

Religiously predominant in the rural areas is traditionalism, magic, individualism, the rites of passage and fatalism. One lives the religious sphere through alienating traditions. Their Christianity is nothing more than semi-magical devotions, without content, with some peripheral and confused notions highlighted by a great pastoral abandonment and the absence of almost any evangelization (Grande 1975: 13-14).

This description of the religious state of peoples is interesting, and it is consistent with Bishop Proaño’s description discussed earlier. Rutilio seemed to imply that the church kept its people ignorant with traditional explanations regarding the evil they experienced from the structural and social sin within which they were immersed. Of course the new evangelization of Vatican II was totally different than the traditional approach, but the religious state of peoples in and around Aguilares reflected traditional forms of ministry and ecclesiology.

### Conclusion

Vatican II, the Bishops at Medellín, Bishop Proaño, and Rutilio Grande, S.J. all embraced the new role of the social sciences in understanding the human and social realities to which they ministered. This new approach was essential for the Church to embrace “justice” as its primary mode of engagement with the world – that is a study of the causes of human suffering and not simply a response to the symptoms (charity). The consequences were direct and clear as well. On March 12, 1977 Rutilio Grande, S.J. paid the cost of fighting for justice with his life, assassinated on the road between Aguilares and El Paisnal by the Salvadoran military. The legacy he left the people of El Salvador was a Church unafraid to study and engage the actual reality within which it lived and ministered.

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