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INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY AND POLITICAL CHALLENGE: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA

I Introduction

Since the 1960s, much transformation has taken place in the role of religion in Latin American politics.² In particular, the role of organized religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, has been shaped by an intense competition for popular resources.³ This competition has generally emerged in two distinct yet powerful forms. For one, Latin America has witnessed tremendous competition between religious and civil society groups in a climate of political liberalization and democracy, largely in place since the mid-1980s.⁴ And second, religious organizations are fiercely competing with each other, pretty much like the firms in a fragmented industry.⁵ Both forms of competition in its magnitude and intensity are unique in Latin American history and deserve careful scrutiny.

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² See Ivan Vallier, *Catholicism, Social Control, and Modernization in Latin America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970); Brian H. Smith, *Religious Politics in Latin America* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1998)

³ Catalina Romero, Globalization, Civil Society and Religion from a Latin American Standpoint," *Sociology of Religion* Vol 62 (2001): 475-490.

⁴ Mark Chaves, "Secularization as a Declining Religious Authority," *Social Forces* 72 (1994): 481-510.

⁵ Meyer Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1996).

The main goal of this essay is to assess the challenges faced as a result of such competition by the Catholic Church, one of the oldest organized religions in the Americas. In addition, the essay evaluates the institutional capacity of the Catholic Church in light of such competition.

It is important to understand the role played by the various churches since they are critical in the democratic consolidation of Latin America. As churches reach out to the popular sector through community organization and other means of communication, they invariably make these communities a capable force of redefining group relationships in the direction of more tolerance and participation, a must for vibrant, democratic society.

The failure of the theories of secularization to address the capacity of organized religion to change from within as well as to help transform society has been much exposed in light of the Latin American experience.⁶ It is clear that organized religious structures continually prepare their responses as a reaction to the changing social environment. Theology cannot be built without a social construction of ideas, experiences, and meanings assigned to symbols that are best understood by people living and sharing them.⁷

In the colonial era, organized religion had commanded greater legitimacy in influencing the structure of traditional authority in Latin American societies. However, since the attainment of political independence in the early nineteenth century, the gradual ascendancy of the modern state in the structuring of authority relations came into conflict with the traditional authority of the churches.⁸ But despite the rise of the state, organized religion continued to create space for itself in the hearts and minds of millions of Latin Americans. Over time, as the modern state failed to become the most efficient of bureaucratic institutions, organized religions evolved, engineered, and orchestrated innovative ideological compromises and new strategic initiatives to sustain their influence in society. Several attempts were made in different regional and national contexts in Latin America to address what many construed as the worsening social realities.⁹

Many of these worsening social realities concerned the intensification of poverty, growing social and power inequity, and the lack of adequate access to education and health care for millions of Latin Americans. At the same time, failure of the devel-

⁶ Jose Casanova, "Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization," *Sociology of Religion* Vol 62 (2001): 415-441.

⁷ Daniel Levine, "Religion, the poor, and politics in Latin America Today," pp. 3-23 in Daniel Levine, Ed, *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

⁸ Matthew Moen and Lowell Gustafson (eds.), *The Religious challenge to the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁹ Michael Dodson and Laura O'Shaughnessy, *Nicaragua's Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

opment models pursued by states across the region has fuelled popular aspirations to seek refuge in the promised solemnity and spiritual salvation by the churches.

Of all the religious organization, the Catholic Church is by far the most recognized and important. In recent years, however, other churches, especially Pentecostal, which are quite resourceful and organized, have made much headway across the region.¹⁰ With many popular religions manifesting as well in a more organized form, Latin America has indeed become a marketplace for competing religions and the implications are far-reaching for the political transformation of the region.¹¹

Many previous studies on religion in politics have indeed accumulated an impressive array of practical knowledge concerning how the diverse popular voices function in Latin America. However, perhaps due to the fluid nature of the events in the 1980s, many refused to make definitive statements about the political expediency of the role of religion.¹² It is undeniable that the Catholic hierarchy has made a political retreat since Vatican II. A fair amount of attention, of course, has been given to clear conservative trends in the Vatican policy, some of which discouraged political activism instigated by the theology of liberation.¹³ The constraining nature of the Vatican although is likely to continue under Pope Benedict XVI, there is some evidence to reflect the fact that the Catholic Church has rebounded in many Latin American countries in spite of the obvious problems of resource constraint.¹⁴ It has indeed been able to form alliances with other sectors, has innovated new strategies of popular mobilization, and has been remarkably effective in the new era of active religious competition.

II A Brief Historical Antecedent

It is widely argued that before 1960 the Catholic Church generally aligned itself with the rich and the powerful in society. Mostly it sought common ground with the industrial, military, landed, and state elites.¹⁵ Of course, the nature and intensity of such alliances depended on the country and the time period. It was invariably true that the Catholic Church remained passive and non-confrontational when it came to explain-

¹⁰ David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹¹ John Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

¹² For example, Arthur F. McGovern, S.J., *Liberation theology and its critics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); also see Cecilia Mariz, *Coping with poverty: Pentecostals and Christian Base Communities in Brazil* (Philadelphia: Temple University press, 1994).

¹³ Christian Smith, "Revolutionary evangelicals in Nicaragua: political opportunity, class interests, and religious identity," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 (1997): 440-54.

¹⁴ Penny Lernoux, *People of God: The struggle for World Catholicism* (New York: Viking, 1989).

¹⁵ Charles Parker, *Otra lógica en América Latina. religión popular y modernización capitalista* (Santiago de Chile: Fondo de cultural económica, 1993).

ing social policies of the Latin American state. There were notable attempts to curb its social power through the launching of revolutions (e.g., Mexican Revolution in 1910), but the Catholic Church remarkably survived as a key institution of power by building or maintaining an impressive array of bureaucratic offices and networks.

But after 1960 things got a little complicated. Powerful forces ranging from the Cuban Revolution to the new urban and rural organization of Latin America facilitated changes in the Catholic Church's stance on major social policies, especially as they concern the poor.¹⁶ Under the growing military authoritarianism in many countries of Latin America, a radicalized or progressive segment committed itself to make the Catholic Church the *voice of the voiceless*.¹⁷ Although the intensity, scope, and political impact of such radicalization within the Catholic Church varied across the region, the consensus is that at least in some countries, such as Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Peru, it had become politically potent.¹⁸

The influence of the theology of liberation in the 1960s on the construction of grassroots Christian communities and the encouragement of local level political organization indicated that perhaps a new church had come to exist.¹⁹ The new church emphasized the need to change the unjust social structures. This stance gained in popularity as some members of the clergy manifested their political activism by organizing the poor. Some in the process became victims of state repression. But the lid was off.

Political activism undertaken by the so-called progressive segment of the Catholic Church gained much publicity as it unfolded during an era of authoritarian military rule in much of Latin America.²⁰ During 1960-1985, as most avenues of political repression were either substantially restricted or completely closed down by the military governments across the region, the Catholic Church became one of the main centers of political opposition.²¹

Since the mid-1980s, however, Latin America left the military authoritarianism chapter of its political history behind. Gradually, the majority of nations started expe-

¹⁶ Paul Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1991); also see Roberto Zub, *Protestantismo y elecciones en Nicaragua* (Managua: Ediciones Nicarao, 1993).

¹⁸ Madeline Adriance, *Opting for the poor: Brazilian Catholicism in transition* (Kansas City: Sheed and ward, 1986); Rev. Walter Altmann, "Religious Pluralism in Latin America," *Latinamerica Press* 28, no. 42, November 14 (1996): 3; Wolfgang Bautz, Noel Gonzalez, Javier Orozco, *Politica y religion, estudio de caso: los evangelicos en Nicaragua* (Managua: Editorial CIEETS and Fundacion Friedrich Ebert, 1994).

¹⁹ Clayton L. Berg and Paul E. Pretz, *Spontaneous Combustion: Grassroots Christianity, Latin American Style* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1996).

²⁰ Phillip Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolutions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984).

²¹ Christian Smith, ed., *Disruptive Religion: the Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

riencing a movement towards greater democratization of the political system. Many of the pressure groups, political parties, labor organizations, and other popular sector activities once banned or severely restricted by military authorities began to develop active political agendas of their own.²² In this changed political landscape, the efficacy of political activism undertaken by the progressive section of the Catholic Church has been called into question. This climate of increasing democratization is beginning to consolidate in the early twenty-first century, despite temporary turbulences in a few countries. As competition staged by the reinvigorated political parties and groups, labor unions, and popular sector organizations intensifies, the Catholic Church has to take a serious stock of its own institutional capacity.

Given the fact that there has been a historical decline in the number of ecclesiastical personnel in Latin America, this is an important exercise. Undoubtedly, a decision to regress in political activism would entail considerable discomfort for the more radicalized segment of the Catholic Church. In the face of increased competition from the non-Catholic Churches, such a decision would be counter-productive. But an active Catholic Church would require a greater institutional capacity.

A major challenge till today has been to channel the previously active segments of its religious personnel to carry out Pope John Paul II and, subsequently, that of Pope Benedict XVI's messages in favor of the new evangelization of the region.²³ Transforming the activist Catholic groups in areas known for radical activism in the 1970s and 1980s is a no small problem. Considerable bitterness still exists between the conservative and the progressives within the respective church hierarchies. The Catholic Church needs all the people it can muster in response to renewed competition for popular resources. In countries where political activism of the Church never reached the level it did in Brazil, Nicaragua, or Peru, the challenge lies mainly in determining the particular type of activities that would keep the Church from losing much of its popular constituency, especially the marginalized, to competing religions.

The challenge that comes from the fast growing Protestant churches is serious. The growth of Protestant denominations has been quite impressive in recent years. David Stoll, for example, has predicted that by 2050, the Central American nations will have Protestant majority populations.²⁴ These groups, especially the evangelical protestant churches, emphasize individual spiritual needs. In addition, their focus on education, saving, thriftiness, honesty, and an individual commitment to

²² Alberto L. Pulido, *The Sacred World of the Penitents* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000).

²³ Emilio A. Nunez and William D. Taylor, *Crisis in Latin America: An evangelical perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989).

²⁴ See David Stoll, *Is Latin America turning Protestant? The politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); also see Edward L. Cleary, "Evangelicals and competition in Guatemala," pp. 167-195 In *Conflict and Competition*, edited by Edward Cleary and H. Stewart-Gambino (Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 1992).

make a better life within a limiting material environment have gained many new members. These challenges of course are all linked to the broader challenge of creating a vibrant, participatory, and politically responsible civil society. This involves attempts to help create multitudes of voluntary associations as forums of popular expression at the community level. In addition, this challenge entails efforts to demystify, not necessarily challenge, authority, which is so important for facilitating political democracy in Latin America.

III Selected Studies on Religion and Politics in Latin America

There are several different paradigms posited in the literature with regard to the relationship between religion and politics in the region. Many scholars have argued in favor of a nuanced "mediation-oriented" perspective toward this subject. Levine, for example, has argued that the embedded relationship between religious change, empowerment, and power is much more complex than previously anticipated. It is important to understand the ideas and institutions that mediate between popular communities where religion has a pervasive say and the larger social structures.²⁵ Based on his acute observation of Christian communities in Colombia, Venezuela, and others, Levine has argued that the leap from empowerment to power is never automatic. But by learning to work in groups towards a common goal, people acquire an important tool of democracy. Social changes, in this argument, if properly contextualized, are likely to be longer-lasting. Popular initiatives as a response to social environment, regardless of how small the observable project is, require some institutional support. Yet, at other times, the same institutional link inhibits the process of adaptation and empowerment. This is a classic dilemma faced by many communities in Latin America energized by the activities of various religious groups. Institutional ties and strengths thus become critical in Levine's analysis of successful religious impact in political configuration.

But, of course, success is more likely if the macro political environment is also conducive. In today's political climate with multiple actors vying for people's attention in Latin America, can any such success be predicted? Many macro level studies on religion and politics have exactly argued so. For example, scholars, such as Paul Sigmund and Scott Mainwaring, have stated that the Catholic Church is inherently more prepared in an ideological sense to withstand this onslaught of political competition.²⁶ It has been argued that the current processes of democratic liberal-

²⁵ Daniel Levine, *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); also see Levine, "Popular groups, popular culture, and popular religion," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32 (1990): 718-764.

²⁶ Paul Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Scott Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916-1985* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986).

ization are not really alien to the Catholic Church. For over a century, through design and through responses to various forms of social change, the Catholic Church has managed to produce the ideological continuum that one normally sees in politics. The Encyclicals ranging from *Rerum Novarum* to Pope John Paul II's call for *New Evangelization* are ample evidence that the Catholic social thought is in support of democracy and political pluralism in theory. The Catholic Church has consistently maintained through the past 30 years that extreme forms of capitalism and socialism are incompatible with the Christian principle. Governments practicing these ideologies are therefore undesirable. Paul Sigmund in particular has consistently stated that the Catholic Church has adapted admirably to societal changes through internal dialogue over its stand on democracy, human rights, and markets, and will continue to do so successfully even though it faces progressively intense competition from other religious and non-religious groups in recent years.²⁷

There are several caveats to the views delineated above. Even if the Church has debated these issues internally, we must see some evidence that it has indeed encouraged or even tolerated dissent in its dealings with not only a part of its clergy but also the pew. Furthermore, can the lack of action be linked to the limits of the Catholic Church's institutional capacity? In the following, several important case studies will be briefly reviewed to illuminate that point. Subsequently, an empirical analysis will be conducted to evaluate the institutional capacity of the Catholic Church.

Studies on Chile have unraveled important dimensions of the Catholic activism in politics. Long ruled by the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, the church had ample opportunities to act as a forum and a mediator between the opposition and the dictatorship. However, in the Chilean case, the importance of the hierarchy and the ecclesia is both underscored in the return to democracy. For example, Fleet has argued that given the climate of political censorship the hierarchy within the church with a wider legitimacy than the regime helped to carve out a big enough space for political opposition through tacit negotiation and conciliation. Although the ecclesia or the Catholic community in general played less of an effective role in the democratization process, it nonetheless was important many respects. According to Fleet, during the long period of the dictatorship, especially in the 1980s, the church-sponsored activism helped to inculcate the values of freedom, human rights, community, and social solidarity.²⁸

²⁷ See various arguments by Sigmund in Paul Sigmund (ed.), *Evangelization and Religious Freedom in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

²⁸ Michael Fleet, *The Rise and Fall of Chilean Christian Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); also see similar arguments for Peru in Michael Fleet and Brian H. Smith, *The Catholic Church and Democracy in Chile and Peru* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

In Bolivia, the Church's role in the marginalized communities of the Andean Highlands has been nothing less than extraordinary, as has been narrated by many scholars. For example, Orta's study highlights some innovative developments in Catholic pastoral work in the highlands. The Catholic catechist in the Bolivian example acts as culturally adept intermediaries. On the one hand, Orta's study of catechists offers a culturally contextualized local level view of the missionary-Aymara relations, while on the other hand, the catechists help us trace a longer history of evangelization on the altiplano. The study amply highlights the dynamic relationships in Bolivia involving pastoral strategies, pastoral practices, and popular religion.²⁹

In another national setting, in this case Venezuela, scholars have provided insights into the tactical innovations pursued by the Catholic Church in the face of competition from the evangelical churches. Much political space is granted by the Catholic hierarchy in the creation of "vicariates" or new "evangelical centers" in an effort to compete effectively with the protestant denominations. This has happened in the poorer areas where the Catholic Church has faced the biggest challenge from its competitors. Froehle, for example, has observed that in poorer communities in Venezuela, the Catholic nuns have been given greater autonomy to deal with the poor.³⁰ The new evangelical centers display considerably less formality and dependence on the parish priests. Although traditionally more Catholic parishes have been found in upper-class areas, over time, as Froehle has found, the number of such presence has grown in less privileged areas. Froehle's study underscores an important point: It is wrong to assume that the Catholic Church is exclusively on the defensive; on the contrary, in the poorer areas of Venezuela it has thrived and even prospered in some cases, according to the indicators of religious participation.³¹

In order to be present and influential, the churches must spend resources on education and social welfare activities. In this area, the Catholic Church has historically received impressive amounts of subsidies from the Brazilian state. As scholars have found, establishing a presence in education has been part of the Catholic Church's larger strategy of assuring itself a prominent position in national decision making.³² State subsidies aid the Church to compete effectively with the public and protestant

²⁹ Andrew Orta, *Catechizing Culture: Missionaries, Aymara, and the "New Evangelization"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³⁰ Bryan T. Froehle, "Religious competition, community building and democracy in Latin America: Grassroots religious organizations in Venezuela," pp. 27-44 In *Religion and Democracy in Latin America*, edited by William H. Swatos (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1995).

³¹ Bryan T. Froehle, "Pentecostals and Evangelicals in Venezuela: consolidating Gains, Moving in New Directions," pp. 201-225 In *Power, Politics, and Pentecostals in Latin America*, Edited by E. Cleary and H. Stewart-Gambino (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

³² Ken Serbin, *Secret Dialogues: Church-State Relations, Torture, and Social justice in Authoritarian Brazil* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

schools. But during the long military rule in Brazil from 1964 to 1985, state subsidies declined. As a result, the Brazilian Catholic Church became increasingly dependent on European governmental and non-governmental sources of financial help. It is possible to explain the Church's oppositional stand to the military in light of the decline in state help, but as Serbin has argued, many of the subsidies have been renewed under the various democratic governments since the return to democratic governance in 1985.³³

But many past studies have also pointed to the importance of the Catholic Church's institutional capacity. Daudelin and Hewitt, for example, discredit the conspiracy theory that blames Vatican conservative policies for the political disengagement in some previously active churches in countries, such as Brazil, Peru, El Salvador, and Chile. They attribute the decline to institutional constraints within the Church, both in terms of material resources and personnel.³⁴ This particular criticism is true in terms of the grander political agendas, so paramount in the late 1960s and 1970s.

IV Measuring Institutional Capacity

Historically, it is commonly argued that the Catholic Church has been a major link between communities and the larger political and economic structures. But the extent to which the Catholic Church can successfully play this role should depend on its institutional capacity.

Measuring the Church's institutional capacity is of critical importance. Social scientists have repeatedly argued that the contemporary world is that of powerful institutions. Citizens around the world live surrounded by institutions, large and small, that influence their efforts to respond to changes in the social environment. Individuals lose their importance without an institutional link and invariably possess more power if they become part of an institution. Citing the importance of institutions in society Adolf A. Berle writes:

"Power is invariably organized and transmitted through institutions. Top power holders must work through existing institutions, perhaps extending or modifying them, or must at once create new institutions. There is no other way of exercising power – unless it is limited to the range of the power holder's fist or his gun".³⁵

³³ Kenneth Serbin, "Latin America's Catholics: Postliberationism?" *Christianity and Crisis* (December 14): 403-407.

³⁴ Jean Daudelin and W. E. Hewitt, "Latin American Politics: Exit the Catholic Church?" pp. 177-194 In *Organized Religion in the Political Transformation of Latin America*, Edited by S. R. Pattnayak (New York: University Press of America, 1996); also see W. E. Hewitt, *Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

³⁵ Adolf A. Berle, *Power* (New Hartcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1967), p. 92.

Individual qualities, skills, ambitions, or personalities may be helpful in gaining institutional positions, but it is situating oneself within an institution that presents the individual greater potential to realize goals in life. Numerous studies, as it was seen through a brief literature review in the previous section, have underscored the importance of the Catholic Church as a major link between communities and the larger social structure. The extent to which the church can successfully play that role depends on its institutional capacity. An examination of such capacity calls for a closer look at the resource base and various important activities that the Catholic Church sponsors. In the following section, I shall concentrate on two key such dimensions: personnel resource base and educational and social welfare activities. Examining whether the personnel resources and the educational and welfare activities have increased, remained constant, or declined over time should provide an indication of changes in the institutional capacity of the church.

Table 1 illustrates the challenge faced by the Catholic hierarchy. In the 1990s, of the 20 Latin American countries displayed in the table, the number of Catholics per Catholic priest declined in 14. In 3 others there was no change. In 3 others, namely, Argentina, Panama, and Uruguay, there was an increase in the number of Catholics per priest. Of the 14 countries that registered such downward trend, most decline in percentage terms occurred in Cuba, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. It is important to remember that in El Salvador, Nicaragua, along with Brazil, Panama, Peru, and Chile, the Catholic Church had shown the most extensive radicalization and participation in politics during authoritarian rule.³⁶ Of these, only Chile indicated no change.

The decline could mean more than one thing. First, it implies that the Catholic Church is losing ground to the competition. Second, it also informs that even in countries with a history of significant Catholic radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s, the decline has continued, Chile being the only exception. It is as if the previous Catholic Church-based social activism did not matter. Sociologists of religion have emphasized the salience of a negative popular reaction to extreme levels of politicization of the Catholic Church.³⁷ Many former Catholics have been turned off by such activism, and have sought refuge in religious alternatives.

³⁶ See Anthony Gill, *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³⁷ See in this regard Elizabeth E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995).

Table 1. Number (in 000s) of Catholics per Catholic Priest, 1990-1998

<i>Country</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>Percent change</i>
Argentina	5.1	5.5	+7.8
Bolivia	7.4	6.6	-10.8
Brazil	9.2	8.7	-5.4
Chile	5.0	5.0	0.0
Colombia	4.9	4.9	0.0
Costa Rica	4.6	4.0	-13.0
Cuba	19.9	15.4	-22.6
Dom. Republic	10.7	9.9	-7.4
Ecuador	6.4	6.4	0.0
El Salvador	11.0	9.2	-16.3
Guatemala	10.8	9.8	-9.2
Haiti	11.8	10.8	-8.4
Honduras	16.6	15.9	-4.2
Mexico	7.1	6.8	-4.2
Nicaragua	11.4	10.3	-9.6
Panama	5.9	6.6	+11.8
Paraguay	6.7	6.4	-4.4
Peru	8.7	8.4	-3.4
Uruguay	4.4	4.8	+9.0
Venezuela	9.2	8.0	-8.7

Source: Statistical Abstract of Latin America, Vol 37.

Table 2 depicts the number of Catholic baptisms per 1,000 Catholics in the same 20 Latin American countries. Except for Cuba and Guatemala, there has been a region-wide steady decline in the performance. The most severe decline has occurred in Panama (35.1%), Nicaragua (34.6%), Peru (33.3%), and Brazil (22.1%). Notice that all four of these countries had the most radicalized church in the 1970s and 1980s. Such declines may be explained in light of intense and relatively successful competition from the Protestant churches and other religious persuasions, such as the Umbanda religious practices in Brazil.³⁸ It also depicts a regional trend that popular religious needs are increasingly being met by the competition.

The national Census data for 2003 from several countries are consistent with this trend. For example, the share of the Protestants in the total population is at least 10% in 13 out the 20 countries that are being analyzed here.³⁹ Guatemala tops the list with

³⁸ John Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation: The Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil at the start of a new Millennium* (London: Ashgate, 2004).

³⁹ Taken from <http://www.providence.edu/las/Statistics.htm>, table 7.

25% of the population being protestant.⁴⁰ It is interesting to see that Guatemala is one of the two countries where the 1990s witnessed a 28% increase in the number of baptisms, according to Table 2.

Following up on growth in the Protestant population, Table 3 illustrates a region-wide growth pattern. Of the 20 Latin American countries under observation, the net decline in Protestant growth has occurred in only 7, the amount varying between -0.1% in El Salvador to -1.6% in Venezuela. By most accounts, such decline would be statistically non-significant. But the rest of Latin America has indeed witnessed impressive rises in the Protestant population. For example, maximum net increase in the 1990s in Protestant population has taken place in countries, such as Haiti (13.2%), Nicaragua (7.3%), Panama (4%), Costa Rica (3.9%), and Brazil (3.2%). Table 3 is generally consistent with the relative success of other religious persuasions vis-à-vis the Catholic Church.

Similarly impressive increases can be observed in the Catholic welfare activities in Latin America as a whole. In Table 6, for example, increases were registered in the number of hospitals, dispensaries, leprosaria, orphanages, and nurseries. The only exception has been a decline in the number of homes for the old, chronically ill, invalid and handicapped, where there was a decline of 12.5%. Focusing again on a select list of countries where a significant portion of the Catholic Church had been politically active in the 1970s and 1980s, Table 4 depicts interesting trends. In Peru, there has been an overall decline in the Catholic welfare activities (-41.3%). But in the rest of the group, the data are generally consistent with the broader regional trends, which attest to an upswing in Catholic welfare activities. Overall, the total Catholic welfare activities in the 1990s increased 88% in Nicaragua, 67% in Panama, 58% in Guatemala, and 50% in Brazil.

V Discussion and Conclusion

The data on Catholic population, baptisms, and net Protestant growth do not augur well for the Catholic Church. But it would be premature on our part to conclude that the Catholic Church has been relatively incapacitated. On the contrary, the data on the Catholic educational and social welfare activities indicate that it has launched an impressive long-term strategy to combat religious competition.

If the institutional incapacity thesis were true, then, how could the Catholic Church have managed to accommodate such impressive increases in educational and welfare activities? It seemingly has significantly recovered in countries, such as Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama, although it still faces problems in terms of its welfare

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Table 2. Number of Catholic Baptisms per 1,000 Catholics, 1990-1998

<i>Country</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>Percent change</i>
Argentina	19.6	16.7	-14.8
Bolivia	29.0	22.8	-21.3
Brazil	18.1	14.1	-22.1
Chile	17.1	13.6	-20.5
Colombia	24.1	19.6	-18.7
Costa Rica	28.9	27.4	-5.2
Cuba	12.8	15.5	+21.1
Dom. Republic	10.8	10.2	-5.5
Ecuador	20.7	18.1	-12.6
El Salvador	20.5	17.4	-15.1
Guatemala	33.4	42.9	+28.4
Haiti	18.2	17.8	-2.2
Honduras	13.8	11.0	-20.3
Mexico	23.3	22.1	-5.2
Nicaragua	23.7	15.5	-34.6
Panama	16.8	10.9	-35.1
Paraguay	23.9	23.3	-2.5
Peru	17.7	11.8	-33.3
Uruguay	15.8	12.6	-20.2
Venezuela	20.5	16.3	-20.5

Source: Statistical Abstract of Latin America, Vol 37.

activities in Peru. Although the general educational and social welfare data seem to indicate a recovery on the part of the Catholic Church, in the absence of data on the Protestant charities valid comparison is not possible. But these trends certainly demonstrate the Church's willingness to focus on the educational and social welfare activities that are beyond the ritualistic or sacramental spheres.

The data presented above do not include any on the media. Needless to say, the Catholic Church has also launched media campaigns, including radio and television, and other communication networks that the various Protestant denominations have so successfully used. There is no reason to believe that the access will remain monopolized by the Protestant Churches only. In that regard, Pedro Moreno of the Rutherford Institute writes:

"In the area of evangelism or proselytization there is a great effort on the part of Evangelicals. At the last meeting of COICON, the Latin America Religious Broadcasters had about 2,000 people in attendance. There are about 1,000 radio stations that

Table 3. Growth in percentages of Protestants and total population, 1980-2000

<i>Country</i>	<i>Protestant growth (1)</i>	<i>Total population growth (2)</i>	<i>Net Protestant growth</i>
Argentina	3.0	1.3	+1.7
Bolivia	5.3	2.5	+2.8
Brazil	5.2	2.0	+3.2
Chile	2.0	1.4	+0.6
Colombia	1.0	1.8	-0.8
Costa Rica	6.0	2.1	+3.9
Cuba	0.6	1.0	-0.4
Dom. Republic	1.5	2.2	-0.7
Ecuador	2.5	2.3	+0.2
El Salvador	2.6	2.7	-0.1
Guatemala	6.1	2.6	+3.5
Haiti	15.0	1.8	+13.2
Honduras	3.1	3.0	+0.1
Mexico	2.1	2.3	-0.2
Nicaragua	10.2	2.9	+7.3
Panama	5.6	1.6	+4.0
Paraguay	1.9	2.3	-0.4
Peru	3.5	2.2	+1.3
Uruguay	2.0	0.7	+1.3
Venezuela	1.0	2.6	-1.6

Source: The total population growth rates are from World Development Report, 1981-2001; Protestant growth rates are based on projections obtained from Statistical Abstract of Latin America, 1986-2001, various issues.

Table 4. Percent change in Catholic Educational activities in Latin America as a whole, 1992-1998

<i>Number of</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>Percent change</i>
Kindergartens (k)	6570	8546	+30.1
No. of k. students	716720	926965	+29.3
No. of Primary schools	10736	15157	+41.1
No. of Primary students	4382946	4885493	+11.5
No. of Secondary schools	6405	7789	+21.6
No. of Secondary students	2422572	2834136	+16.9
No. of Univ. students	592556	972208	+64.1
No. of Ecclesiastical students	8845	28895	+226.0

Source: Statistical Abstract of Latin America, Vol. 37.

Table 5. Percent change in catholic Educational activities in selected countries, 1991-1998

Country	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Brazil	+34.0	-1.8	+24.0	-5.9	+13.0	+30.0	+19.0	+341.0
Guatemala	+62.0	-48.0	+506.0	+226.0	+32.0	+55.0	+81.0	+8.6
Nicaragua	+168.0	+28.7	+483.0	-57.5	+90.9	+140.0	n.a	n.a
Panama	+2.4	+24.0	+17.0	+9.3	+18.0	+12.0	-4.3	n.a
Peru	+58.0	+20.0	+29.0	+13.0	+49.0	+12.0	=757.0	+86.0

n.a=data not available; 1 = kindergartens; 2=kindergarten students; 3=primary schools; 4=primary school students; 5=secondary schools; 6=secondary school students; 7=university students; 8=ecclesiastical students; source: Statistical Abstract of Latin America, Vol. 29 and Vol. 37.

Table 6. Percent change in Total Catholic Welfare activities in Latin America, 1992-1998

Number of	1992	1998	Percent change
Hospitals	1187	1256	+5.8
Dispensaries	4389	5387	+22.7
Leprosaria	52	91	+75.0
Homes *	1764	2013	-12.5
Orphanages	1283	1537	+19.7
Nurseries	3666	3207	-12.5
Others •	14192	20365	+43.5
Total	26479	33856	+27.8

*Homes indicate places for the old, chronically ill, invalid and handicapped; Source; • others indicate a combined category of matrimonial advice centers; Source: Statistical Abstract of Latin America, Vol 37.

Table 7. Percent change in Catholic welfare activities, selected countries, 1992-1998

Country	1	2	3	4*	5	6	7•	8
Brazil	+8.7	-7.0	+43.0	+11.0	-6.6	+9.5	+102.0	+49.6
Guatemala	+6.0	+45.0	No change	+25.0	+41.0	+80.0	+64.0	+58.0
Nicaragua	-20.0	+78.0	n.a	+20.0	-7.6	+275.0	+160.0	+88.0
Panama	n.a	-33.3	n.a	+40.0	-30.0	+72.0	+95.0	+67.0
Peru	-19.0	+3.0	-29.0	+86.0	+27.0	-84.0	-38.0	-41.3

n.a = data not available; 1=hospitals; 2=dispensaries; 3=leprosaria; 4=homes; 5=orphanages; 6=nurseries; 7=others; 8=total; for * and • see notes under Table 6; Source: Statistical Abstract of Latin America, Vol 37.

broadcast evangelical sermons and messages. There are about 100 TV stations that are owned and operated by Evangelicals in Latin America. There is one, if not two, satellite transmissions 24 hours a day broadcasting all over Latin America by radio and some TV networks. They are mainly Evangelical links. This, of course, has created a desire on the side of the Catholic Church to establish televangelists.”⁴¹

There is nothing to stop the Catholic Church from being innovative in the use of modern technology in order to convey its message to the masses. If done properly, with the use of modern technologies the Catholic Church could very well reach more people than ever before in history. The general recent upsurge in the educational and social welfare activities indicates that institutional involvement of the Catholic Church in society is at least multidimensional. It is too early to write it off as a major player in Latin American politics and society.

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⁴¹ Pedro Moreno, "Latin America from a Protestant Perspective" <http://www.religiousfreedom.com/conference/brazil/moreno.htm>, page 1.

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Abstract

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INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY AND POLITICAL CHALLENGE: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA

With increased competition from the Protestant denominations, the Catholic Church finds itself precariously placed in Latin America in recent years. In light of the steady decline in the number of Catholics and Catholic priests in the region, many have predicted the Church's gradual irrelevance in politics. But as this study argues, that is not exactly the case. Although the growth in Protestant populations continues unabated in Latin America, the Catholic Church has increased its involvement in educational and social welfare activities. This seems to be a long-term strategy, and is particularly true in countries where it faces the most intense competition from other religions.

Key words: Religious competition, Institutional capacity, Political challenge, Education, Social welfare, Latin America.

Резиме

Сатија Р. Патнајак

ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛНИ КАПАЦИТЕТ И ПОЛИТИЧКИ ИЗАЗОВ: КАТОЛИЧКА ЦРКВА У ЛАТИНСКОЈ АМЕРИЦИ

Са порастом утицаја супарничких протестантских деноминација, Католичка црква у Латинској Америци последњих година почела је да се осећа све несигурније и све угроженије. Ако се има у виду чињеница да у том региону стално опада број католика и католичких свештеника, многи предвиђају да ће улога Католичке цркве у политици бити све мање релевантна. Али, као што смо то изнели у овој студији, те тврдње нису потпуно тачне. Без обзира на то што број протестантских верника стално и неометано расте у Латинској Америци, Католичка црква је појачала своје активности на образовном и социјалном плану. Изгледа да је реч о дугорочној стратегији и та констатација је потпуно тачна када су у питању оне земље у којима се Католичка црква суочава са најснажнијим супарништвом других религија.

Кључне речи: верско надметање, институционални капацитет, политички изазов, социјално благостање, Латинска Америка.