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The Challenge of the Sects in Latin America

by Francisco Sampedro Nieto, C.M.

In Europe and in the United States there is a lot of talk about the great growth of unbelief and materialism. In Latin America there is a similar growth of the sects. The way we talk of these phenomenon is not always adequate or exact. We believe that the problem is that not enough clarity has been given about what the sects are, and that we have mixed "sects" and "sectarianism," "sects" and "fundamentalism," which some authors call "fundamentalist sects." Let us do some analysis.(1)

The Problem in Latin America

In the 1960s the problem of the sects had not yet become a great concern in Latin America. For example, at the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops (Medellín), which took place in 1968, the main issues reflected upon were the inequalities that brought about poverty and human misery.(2) As a result there came a strong option for the poor.(3) The theme of the sects only came up in the Document where it indicated that it was necessary to know about these sects; they do not have interest in social problems, nor do they make commitments to remedy them.

In the '70s there existed in the United States a special drive toward social justice taken on by the Catholic Church. In contrast with this was the presence and action of the sects and fundamentalist groups.(4)

In the Third Conference of Latin America Bishops (Puebla), which took place in 1979, there was more direct attention paid to the problem of the sects.(5) They stated that the sects had taken an aggressive attitude with their propaganda and their methods of taking over; Puebla asked that this phenomenon be studied and that the religious piety of the people be reinterpreted.(6) Puebla named the sects "Free Religious Movements"; this terminology is still not adequate, because it can be confused with the free churches or the missionary churches.(7) In the document, the following things are spelled out about the sects: it speaks of their tactics as an invasion; they are aggressive, proselytizing, propagandizing, threatening, anti-catholic, syncretic.(8) At the same time, the Document recognizes that part of the problem is owed to the Catholic Church which "has not reinterpreted the religion of the Latin America people, thus producing an emptiness that the sects are ready to fill." It also admits that the Church has not provided sufficient

means to build up poor education in the faith of our people.(9) The Document also points out the positive aspects in the sects, like the desire for community and participation, and for a more vibrant liturgy. All of this demands response from the Catholic Church.

Since Puebla, there have been different documents of Episcopal Conferences, Commissions, Departments, or persons which have said the same and singled out some new aspects that have kept arising. In them all, great attention is to be given to the challenges that the sects present.(10) These writings call us to self-criticism.

Moving ahead one more step, the Fourth Conference of Latin America Bishops (Santo Domingo), which was celebrated in 1992, returned to the same theme. But there still is not clarity in the terminology used about the sects. The Document speaks of "fundamentalist sects," whose presence has grown increasingly since Puebla(11); then, it presents us with the New Religious Movements (NMR) which are, for us, the sects properly so-called.(12) So we move to make a brief critical analysis.

a) About the fundamentalist sects

These groups propose Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. It is important to have a personal experience of Jesus. The center of the message ... We believe that this is the reason Santo Domingo gave such special attention to these groups called "fundamentalist sects." They are defined like this: "The fundamentalist sects are religious groups that insist that only faith in Jesus Christ saves and that the only foundation of faith is the Sacred Scripture, interpreted in a personal and fundamentalist way, which is why they exclude the Church, and insist in the nearness of the end of the world and the last judgement."(13) The same can be applied to many groups called "evangelicals."

As far as their characteristic attitudes, we see that they use very inappropriate methods as they go visiting homes; they accomplish their ends by giving literature that twists the truth, with money and the latest equipment to back them up.(14) They ask for strict adherence to their teachings and are aggressive against the Catholic Church. They read the Bible literally and out of context and with no connection to the life of the Church. They manipulate the use of social communications, tithing, and the emotional side of things.(15)

It is also clear that when these groups move into Latin America(16), that they search out the most vulnerable people: migrants, people who feel abandoned and with great material problems, simple people without any formation in the faith.(17) This is a

challenge for the Catholic Church, which ought to be more of an evangelizing Church and thus fill up the emptiness of so many.

b) About the New Religious Movements (NMR).

Santo Domingo gave this name to the groups that we call "sects properly so called." It defines them as "eclectic religious forms which satisfy their identity and human longings."(18) The current types of this phenomena are:

Para-christians or Semi-christians: [tondo]Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons. They are characterized by their proselytism, millenarianism, and their organized businesses. We also call them pseudo-christians. Here we also include Christian Scientists, God's Children, Moon and the International Way (Branches).(19)

Esoterics: *Spiritualists, Rosacrucians, Gnostics, Theosophy, etc. They are characterized by seeking out special illuminations, religious cultism, and secret knowledge.*

Philosophies and Oriental Cults: Hare Krishna, Divine Light, Ananda Marga, and others. They meddle in mysticism and experience.

Of Asiatic origin: Here are clustered all the groups derived from Buddhism (Sikh, etc.), from Hinduism (Yoga, etc.), and Islam (Fe Baha'i).

Social Religious: this is where we place the Moon sect, the New Acropolis, and electric churches. They consider themselves the experts in objective ideology, politics, and use conversion, healing, and modern means of communication.

Divine Cure: These are centers that are dedicated to spiritual and physical healings.

This classification is disputed,(20) but it allows us to make reference to the sects that now exist on this continent of hope.

The Growth

Much has been said about the high growth rate of sects in America. I believe that the high percentages reported are not real and are due to what was said earlier here, that evangelical groups are united with fundamentalist sects and sects properly so-called (NMR).

In the first place, Jeffrey Klaiber affirms:

"More and more, the expansion of the fundamentalist groups and the non-christian sects in Latin America is arousing great interest among the social scientists. This phenomenon makes one think that Latin America is experiencing a cultural revolution perhaps more important, inclusive, and enduring than any political revolution. According to the most recent calculations, approximately 40 million Latin-Americans are protestants. That is to say, about 10% of the population. In Brazil, about 20% of the population is protestant. In Chile, between 20% and 25%. In Guatemala, it is estimated at 30%. In Nicaragua, about 20%. On the other hand, protestantism has not as such growth in other countries, like Colombia, Venezuela, or Uruguay. It is important to point out that the groups that grow the most are not from among those called "historical churches" (Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, or Presbyterian), but "fundamentalists," also known in the United States as "evangelicals." In Chile, for example, about 80% of protestants belong to the pentecostals (the Pentecostal Methodist Church). According to David Stoll, author of a recent book on this theme, if this actual rate of growth is maintained, in the year 2020, 57% of the population of Brazil will be protestant; in Puerto Rico, 75%, and in Guatemala, 127%."(21)

Hermenegildo Zanuso says:

"There is an irresistible growth of 11% annually of the churches and sects that are moving into Latin America. At such a rate, that from the beginning of the 20th century the non-catholics in Latin America numbered 50,000, and now they number 40 million; at this rate of growth, in 14 years they will be some 140 million. Every day, more or less 8,000 Catholic Latin Americans become protestant."(22)

At the same time the growth described here does not always bear out as projected. Regarding Chile, it is reported that there is a growth of protestant population from 20% to 25%. Nonetheless, the 1992 National Census gave the percentage of protestants at 0.8%, and of evangelists at 12.4%, totaling 13%. However, the decrease of Catholics since the 1970 Census has been only 3.9%. The difference in those figures is considerable. And you have to admit that a census, even with its limitations, is the most complete global statistic we have.

Nonetheless, we must recognize the problem of the sects and NMR and the decrease in the number of Catholics. But we are of the opinion that the decrease comes from three factors: 1) the certain growth of pentecostals and other evangelicals, especially fundamentalists(23); 2) the sects and NMR; 3) the atheism and unbelief that has reached from 5.8% in some countries to 11% in others.(24).

It also must be said that the sects or NMR, although smallest by percentage, are especially dangerous. It is very important that we scrutinize them and make serious pastoral and juridical remarks about them.

Pastoral Challenges

The Document of Santo Domingo presents challenges and important pastoral guidance regarding the fundamentalist sects as well as the NMR.(25) Without diminishing their value, we propose these pastoral responses.

1. Response concerning the search for the Absolute.

Being human, a religious being looks for an encounter with the transcendent, the divine, the mysterious. Our evangelization and pastoral work offers the true way of meeting with God. He is the absolute who searches us out, and he is the "totally other" who can fulfill the life of every person.

God responds to the ultimate questions that modern man continues to ask. Jesus can fill the desire for the experience for which post modern man looks. Still, everyone needs illumination and orientation to follow the better way.

2. Formation of persons. Always, but very especially in these times, we need a serious and profound formation. Only with it can we resist the great variety of religious thought, ideologies, or sects of all types in the modern world. We think that formation should be on three levels:

a) General and systematic formation. After Vatican II many beautiful things were written. But perhaps what was missing was a systematized formation that presents all the fundamentals of the Catholic faith. In this formation everyone should touch upon revelation and the faith, Christ, the Church, the sacraments, and the future of the human race. If our Catholic education were more solid, perhaps some of our catechists and many of our faithful would not abandon the Church. What happened to them? What was wrong? Certainly we cannot be Catholics like our elders, but we must be prepared to defend our faith and hope.

b) Biblical formation. The Bible is a major attraction. Many say that they went to other groups because there they were taught to read the Bible. Surely they use the Bible a lot, and just as surely it can be abused. Sometimes it is a means of attracting people and winning them over. Our Catholics must know more about the Bible, be able to use it, and be able to find readings in it. There have already been some steps taken to form bible studies, bible circles and workshops, etc. But there is so much more to be done.

c) Specific formation in knowing how to refute them. The biblical texts and thoughts used by some evangelists and sects are not numerous. When one knows this and is prepared to answer them, they have very little success. Their doctrine is simple. It would be excellent to prepare our Catholics to know the poor use some religious groups make of their doctrinal points. It would be very useful to prepare our Catholics to ask them questions about things that do not make sense in what they are saying. Thus, if they say that Christ is not God, one can show them some bible passages that refer to his divinity. One cannot dialogue with the sects, but one can ask them questions. When we ask them such questions, they will not know how to respond because they are only prepared to sell their certain goods.(26)

3. More "personal" apostolic work, and accompaniment. The sects have no other type of apostolate but that of "person to person." A young person proposes a thought to another, a friend to a friend. In this way there is a great chance for success. In our Church such a personal approach is just beginning. We generally minister in large groups. We have to develop more means of home visiting and personal contact.

Such personal attention and accompaniment is desired by so many people. The longings deep within the mystery of the human person are usually only shown to God, the director of the spirit. For this reason, the sects encourage people to speak with their gurus and master leaders. And these undertakings employ special guides.

4. More participation of the laity. All that has preceded these remarks demands a greater force of lay ministers in our Church. And of course "we are all the Church." Only with collaboration with the laity can the more personal approach be realized, especially to prepare them to be spiritual guides, and cooperate in the pastoral approach to the sick; we cannot forget that the sick find themselves in a situation very existential and religious. This is how many sects work. We found that the evangelists had sent up to 10,000 missionaries through Latin America. In Chile, 1200 Mormon missionaries walk the street nine hours a day, from Monday to Sunday, with three hours break each day to study and rest. In this way they dedicate 10,800 hours a day to preach and convert.(27) Compared to that, how much missionary work do any of our lay people do?

Perhaps it is for this reason that the 1986 *Informe* of the Holy See about the sects and the new religious movements spoke of reviewing the parochial system we now have. We believe, for sure, that there must be a change of attitude, a structure for changing the economic contribution, and an evangelizing commitment.

5. Missionary revitalization. There are religious groups who have occupied places we have not tended to and have taken over old missions that the Church has abandoned. Surely the traditional mission work had its defects, but we cannot forget that it can and should be renewed. Moreover, we cannot forget that the Church is essentially "missionary" and every single member of it ought to do his part in spreading the message of Christ.

It is now time to revitalize the missionary spirit and action in the life of our faithful. By baptism, all of our lay people are to be missionaries. Some evangelicals and sects have them. There are some parishes and congregations that have put on the missionary attitude and returned to that work, but there is still a lot to do.

6. Youth ministry. It is said that most of those who join the sects are young people who are finishing high school or are in their first years at the university. Also, youths who are without work, middle-aged women who do not yet know what to do with their lives and their time, and older people who find themselves lonely seek refuge in these sects; the sects get close to these elders because they are interested in getting their inheritances.

Looking at our youth today, it seems a reality that many times they do not come from solid families and they have also been let down by society and the education system. At other times they find little chance for work and are left unattended and misunderstood by adults. Then, along come the sects offering the young person affection, a group to belong to, considering the youth to be "someone." They offer a new vision of humanity, of the world, and of history. This grabs the younger person.

Our ministry should dedicate much more energy to work with the young adult. This is not always easy, but the person of Jesus Christ attracts them. On both parish and college levels, we need specially trained persons dedicated to help young people become involved, participate and work in our Church.

7. Experience of God. We live in the day of "feelings" and the search for experience. We have spoken with people who have entered the sects in search of the occult, finding the experience they needed. In the sects one finds exercises, techniques, cults, and every class of strange activities.

We believe that we in the Church have failed to bring our faithful to experiences of prayer. We are rich in methods of prayer, but we fail to teach them. Christian meditation is the best, because it brings us into communication with the true God and helps us know the truth. Nevertheless, this means of prayer does not get to the majority of our Catholics. There is much to do in this area.

8. Base Communities (Comunidades eclesiales de base). Human beings aspire to community and need it. One pays more attention to an individual in a small group. Relationships can develop. This is what many people seek in the sects and in small groups of evangelicals. We believe that our CEBs can respond to these needs. In these groups the person is treated as "someone," can take a more active role, is recognized, and reads and reflects with others upon God's Word.

The parish itself should be a "community of communities." This would come closer to what many Catholics are seeking in other groups. In this way, better interrelationships would develop, the sharing of experiences and testimonies, which means very much to many people.

9. Mass media. We live in the time of the mass media and we have to put it to use at the service of the New Evangelization. The media has such a dominant place in the new culture, and it must have a prominent place in the present and future living and sharing of the Christian faith.

The evangelicals and other sects constantly utilize the mass media. In our Church, there is much left to be done in this area. We also have to take into account the "cultural identity" and the problem of inculturation. We have to talk to the person of this age with the means and the language that are their own. They call for a simple language with adequate responses.

10. Information. The problem of the sects demands that we inform people of them: what they are, their doctrine, their tactics, and the dangers. In this way we have a preventive ministry that will keep many from falling into these groups. Usually we are working in a curative mode, that is, after they have joined the sects; then everything is more difficult. We must remember that a sect is easy to enter but very hard to leave.

To do this, and to reorient those who have come back to us from the sects in an adequate manner, we must be informed ourselves. Only if I know what has happened in the group can I give a personal and adequately pastoral orientation. It is very important to know the sects, their mode of operation and the dangers involved; since I cannot know all of them, I should at least have a good bibliography to inform me when necessary. Informed I can inform and help others.

11. Family ministry. The family is the subject and the object of evangelization. An evangelized family that lives as a Christian family, in a real faith relationship as spouses, parents and children, is much less likely to fall into sects. And do not forget that the sects try to divide and destroy families. Many times it is one of the spouses or one of the children that leaves our faith. So we have to have an adequate catechesis beginning from early childhood, which teaches the faith and prayer. The whole family ought to be united in prayer, to reflect together on God's word, and participate together in the Church.

The unformed family with problems is a ripe field for the sects to work on. The Christian family that is well formed is protected against the sects. And the evangelizing family helps other brothers and sisters against the sects.

The sects or New Religious Movements also present legal challenges which surface in the United States; in Latin America there is little problem in this area. It has not yet taken hold that the sects are dangerous and affect not only the family, education, the person, but also the governments themselves. They work their way into economics, politics, and ideology.

We cannot go on any longer here, but we want to conclude by affirming that our continent ought to be very conscious of this great challenge facing the Church from without and from within, where there are many reasons that the sects are growing. Only if we do will we be the continent of hope.

1) About *Las sectas en América Latina* we have written on other occasions: cf. Sampedro, Francisco., in *Razón y Fe* 226 (1992) 311-321. We will not repeat what was written there, but will add to it. This is part of the project FONDECYT 1971 292-1997, entitled "Nuevos Movimientos Religiosos o sectas y libertad religiosa; Criterios para una solución jurídica."

2) Medellín, 14,1.

3) Medellín, 17,7.

4) Cf. Sampedro, Francisco, *Sectas y otras doctrinas en la actualidad*, Bogotá (1995) 319-320.

5) Cf. Documento final (1979). There are 12 sections that pertain to this theme.

6) Cf. Puebla, 469.

7) It must be said that there is no clarity of terminology in Latin America. Sometimes protestant groups are included in the sects. Likewise, the growth rate of the sects appears to be overestimated and unreal.

8) Cf. *Puebla*, 419, 342, 1108, 1109, 112, 456, 1102.

9) *Puebla*, 469 and 628.

10) Cf. Boch, Juan, *Para conocer las sectas*, Navarra (1994) 208-2.

11) *Santo Domingo*, 140.

12) Cf. Sampedro, Francisco, *Religiones, sectas y evangelización desde Santo Domingo*, en Medellín 87 (1996) 135.

13) *Santo Domingo*, 140.

14) *Santo Domingo*, 139-140.

15) *Santo Domingo*, 38.

16) *Santo Domingo*, 26.

17) *Santo Domingo*, 141.

18) *Santo Domingo*, 147.

19) Cf. Sampedro, F., *Evangélicos y Sectas*, Santiago (1992) 25.

- 20) Which is why we made another classification: cf. above, 25-27. We also allude therein to possible causes of these groups. Cf. Santo Domingo 147, 148, 149.
- 21) Klaiber Jeffrey, "Cambios religiosos en América Latina y entre los hispanos de Estados Unidos, in *Revista Teológica Limense* 3 (1992) 334.
- 22) Zanuso Hermenegildo, *Iglesias y sectas en América Latina*, Mexico (1989) 5.
- 23) In countries like Chile Pentecostals would be estimated to make up 75% or 80% of the evangelicals. Cf. Sampedro, Francisco, [toco]Sectas en América Latina... 317.
- 24) Cf. *Evangélicos y sectas*, 40.
- 25) Cf. Santo Domingo, 141-147 and 150-153. "Sobre las sectas fundamentalistas" cf. Navarra (1994). This is a good contribution.
- 26) Cf. Sampedro, Francisco. *Las Iglesias cristianas*. Bogotá (1996) 99-115.
- 27) Cf. Mujica E. "Aumentan acciones para atraer fieles de distintos credos," en *El mercurio* Santiago, November 20, 1993, A-27.