

Agustín MORENO MOLINA

Andrés Bello Catholic University

VENEZUELAN CATHOLIC CHURCH OVER THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

ABSTRACT The Catholic Church is a binding element for understanding the historical process of Venezuela after the three hundred years of Spanish rule, during which time, and along with the various forms of institutions inherited from the mother country, customs and values were established that contributed to the development of the country. In this essay, we make an assessment of the role of the Catholic Church during the independence process, of its conflicts with the new republic during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the gradual recovery of its social presence during the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez. Then, with the onset of representative democracy, the Church's relation with the political power becomes regularized within a legal framework that allows it to continue in the exercise of his pastoral duties in a climate of respect and collaboration, but with a critical sense to the great problems of society.

KEY WORDS Catholic Church, Venezuela, 19th and 20th centuries.

Catholicism in Venezuela, during its republican history, has gone through several stages, each, of course, with its problems and challenges. In the early days, and this is an extensively – though not systematically – studied chapter, what was at stake was the social influence of religious power, facing the recently created state power. Within these conflicts we can find those of Bishop Ramon Ignacio Mendez in 1830 and Felipe Guevara y Lira in 1870. The new political actors did not look favorably upon any concurrent power, and the Church, though clearly diminished because of the war of independence and without the material and human resources of yesteryears, remained

a social reference with some patterns, especially in education and spiritual influence, at least uncomfortable in light of the mentality of the builders of the new times.

For some reason or without it, every government in the nineteenth century saw the Church as a threat or an obstacle on the road to modernity, for it stood for tradition, monarchy and meddling in political affairs. So they were anticlerical, but not anti-Catholic or anti-religious, because “the Catholic” or the “religious”, according to a mentality not shared by the clergy, entered the forum of conscience or the inner, reserved fields to freedom and individual sovereignty.

The same political class, sometimes Masonic and freethinking and the humble people, who followed a tradition of adhering to Catholic tradition, though without much religious culture, kept alive the seed of faith, and ultimately the bishops weathered the storms and whims of politicians and gradually restructured the ruined building. By the late nineteenth century some congregations and religious orders come into the country, some newspapers that appeared were ran by committed secular Catholics and priests and new congregations are founded.¹ The belligerence or conquest of power spaces were not in the mind of the church leadership, but pastoral concern, the catechesis of children and adults, the formation of new priests, the promotion of charity work and combating, though discreetly, certain philosophical stances contraries to religion.

In 1904 appears the first Venezuelan Bishops’ Pastoral Statement², which expresses action guidelines of a Church could overcome without necessary acts of supreme heroism difficulties to adapt to the reality of the country. Great credit, but not exclusive, to make a success of the Catholics by a sometimes tortuous path due to internal clashes between clergy *caraqueño*³ had Archbishop of Caracas Monsignor Juan Bautista Castro.

During the government of General Juan Vicente Gomez (1908-1927) the church had secured greater freedom of action for as long as they did not mix things *of God with those of Caesar*. The Diocese of Zulía, San Cristobal and Barquisimeto were founded and there is a growing number of priests, some religious orders like the Jesuits, who were forbidden to enter the country since the mid-nineteenth century returned and catholic education gradually increases its presence a greater presence. However the scope of the Church was still surrounded by the law of Trustees that Gomez and his cohorts enforced, as happened when the bishop of Valencia Salvador Montes de Oca was expelled from the country. The incident was caused by the spread of genuine pastoral letter on Catholic stand about marriage. The incident affected the mayor of a city who divorced with the intention of remarrying. The church was accused of disregard the legal ordain and contempt of the laws of the Republic and the oath to the Constitution.

¹ A. Moreno Molina, ‘Contexto Histórico de la Iglesia Católica en Venezuela a finales del siglo XIX e inicios del XX’, *ITER. Revista de Teología*, N° 45-46 (enero-agosto 2008), pp. 264-266.

² Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana, *Instrucción Pastoral del Episcopado Venezolano al clero y fieles de la República. Dictada en las conferencias que dicho Episcopado celebró en Caracas el año del Señor MCMIV, 23 de mayo – 27 de julio*, Caracas 1905.

³ View: J.H. Quintero, *Para la historia*, Caracas 1974.

The official press criticized the conduct of the bishop and the controversy, in which the government led by Juan Bautista Pérez and bishops mediated, allowed old anticlerical feelings of some minister's to afloat and surfaced harassment towards foreign clergy dedicated to education. Juan Vicente Gómez, meanwhile, stayed out of the conflict. The National Congress demanded the immediate resignation of the president and among the allegations was the incident with the clergy. The decree of expulsion of Bishop Montes de Oca was repealed when General Gómez took over the Presidency of the Republic on June 13, 1931.

With the death of the dictator a profound anticlerical sentiment aroused as not seen since the previous century but this time as the result of Marxism, very influential in those years in Europe, especially in Spain. The Church was accused of being the accomplice of many ills caused by gomecismo. Then the bishops responded to the attacks in the collective letter of December 8, 1936.⁴ There the Catholic Church fixed its position, perhaps for the first time in the twentieth century, on the specific problems of the country: the labor question, the right to property and its limitations, trade union rights, the natural right of the family to educate children, the defense of marriage and the family versus free love.

Amid a climate of greater political freedoms Catholics were discovering all that needed to be done. In the parishes of cities and towns, the heart of Christian families are emerging, with the encouragement of pastors, lay apostolate organizations, and schools a generation of young people was arousing that would realize their role in the various sectors of the nation, especially in the political field, which for those circumstances is a real hotbed thanks to civil liberties granted by the government of General Eleazar López Contreras, who in his youth had been a student of Sacred Heart School, founded in the late nineteenth century by the distinguished educator Monsignor Jesús Manuel Jáuregui Moreno. Indeed, thanks to the educational success of Catholic schools a new kind of Venezuelan was emerging, a kind without those remnants of anticlerical sentiments of the nineteenth century, with a solid intellectual formation imbued with the principles of the social doctrine of the Church. That weight was noticeable in the field of education as it could be seen in the famous incident of decree 321 of May 1946. The government headed by Rómulo Betancourt had no choice but to negotiate with the leaders of private education in view of the rarefied atmosphere caused by a decree purporting to discriminate at a disadvantage for private education mainly Catholic against the official.

Catholics action of did not go unnoticed. The National Union of Students and later the Social Christian Party COPEI were created. The latter of which was never a confessional party though the founding members had studied in schools run by religious. During the three years between 1945 and 1948 the active participation of Christians in the political debate overthrew the image of a church ran uniquely by priests and bishops who bowed to the government. In those years, and this is indicative of the new way

⁴ *Compañeros de Camino. Cartas, Instrucciones y Mensajes*, Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana, Vol. 1, Introd. y comp. por Mons. Baltazar Porras Cardozo, Caracas 2000, p. 103.

to meet the challenges, the Episcopate publishes three pastoral letters and nine collective messages, all relating to the problems facing the nation.⁵

FROM COEXISTENCE TO FREEDOM OF ACTION

The 50's further consolidated the presence of Catholicism in Venezuela. However although the people maintain the tradition of their faith, a concern begins to take force about a problem that was there but without being appreciated in all its dimensions. It's the shortage of priests. In 1951, according to figures available, there were 422 diocesan priests, many burdened by illness or by age, in a population of about five million. Religious, in roughly equal numbers, largely attending educational and parish work, accentuating the problem, without any hope in sight in the short term, especially when there were 114 seminarians nationwide. Anyway shortage was noticeable because new movements of lay apostolate of committed Christians as the Catholic Action, Venezuelan Catholic Youth and Venezuelan Catholic Workers Youth, demanded a more close and assiduous spirit guides.

In 1952 Congress approved the creation of the diocese of Guanare and Barcelona, new ecclesiastical circuits to further facilitate their missionary work. In that decade, which corresponds to the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the presence of private education at all levels became stronger and the creation of Universidad Santa Maria in October 1953 by initiative of the teacher Lola Fuenmayor, and Universidad Católica Andres Bello led by the Society of Jesus. Also other Christian denominations of Protestant origin, some with many years in the country began to be felt. Jehovah's Witnesses, the Presbyterian Church, Adventists and Baptists gather his followers in various regions of the country. When in November 24 of 1954, the first Lutheran church is inaugurated in Caracas; the rest of evangelical churches had more than twenty five houses of worship across the country. One sign of a more decisive presence was the celebration in Caracas of the Eighth Pan American Congress of Evangelism, by a solemn public ceremony in the *Nuevo Circo* (New Circus), with attendance of about four thousand people, judging by the news media.⁶ If this happened in the plane of the work of individuals with regard to a life of faith, whose balance was quite optimistic about the growth of Catholicism signs although within a plurality of Protestant religions; regarding institutional relationships between Catholic Church and the Venezuelan State had never been better. Indeed for much of the dictatorial regime of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, which must be placed in the international context of the Cold War, the struggle against the communist threat was perhaps the junction between the political and the religious.

⁵ *Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana*, Tomo I-A: *Cartas, Instrucciones y Mensajes (1883-1977)*, Introd. y comp. por Mons. B. Porras Cardozo, Caracas 1978, pp. 163-220.

⁶ A. Moreno Molina, 'La Iglesia católica en la dictadura de Marcos Pérez Jiménez' in *Fe y Cultura en Venezuela. Memorias de la II Jornadas de Historia y Religión. Ponencias*, Caracas 2002, p. 316.

The Church hierarchy most of the time remained discreet, if not as a support system neither as the opposition to the excesses committed by political repression. It took the pragmatic attitude of silence and appeared close to the government to the extent that it will support the pastoral purposes among which education had the leading voice. This position changed substantially following the death of the archbishop of Caracas, Lucas Guillermo Castillo. The successor, Monsignor Rafael Arias Blanco, who had remained low profile, began to be felt. He was a progressive man, who from the outset, with the necessary tact to not cause traumatic ruptures as in the past, focused his pastoral duties in a more critical view of the social situation of the country, and influenced the clergy and the rest of the episcopate to take positions more committed.⁷ His first note was the Pastoral Letter of May 1, 1957. It was the first that the prelate published a May. He had done since 1955 on the occasion of the feast of St. Joseph the Worker, instituted by Pope Pius XII. In this opportunity denounced the social problems of the Venezuelan workers.

In fact the document held no declaration of war against the regime, nor incited the masses against him. It only denounced the lack or no social sensitivity that he had displayed towards the poorest sectors of society. The Government interpreted it as aggression and thereafter relations with the clergy turned sour. That document reflecting the feelings of Catholics, who have been consulted by the discreet and pertinacious efforts of the pastors and members of the Young Christian Workers, was one factor, perhaps circumstantial, which together with the widespread discontent of entrepreneurs, intellectuals, workers, students and military spurred the overturn of the already undermined dictatorship.

THE CHURCH THAT SEES ITSELF

The advent of democracy brought several lessons. The first is that the new way needed a minimum of consensus of the new political actors, and second, that the Catholic Church was no longer seen as the “poor relative of a wealthy family.” While no member of the Catholic Church was present at the signing of the so called “*Pacto de Punto Fijo*”, one of the agreements of the parties involved was to normalize relations between the Church and the State. It made no sense to maintain a legal structure which was in place since colonial times which subjected the religious to the political. No one before, within political power, thought of eliminating the Patronage Act of 1824, under which the new Republic emerged after independence took for itself those privileges that in the sixteenth century Pope Alexander VI had granted to the King of Spain, under which the state had the power to appoint bishops and other authorities and to intervene in any and all religious affairs. For the Church, on the other hand, the patronage was an ordeal and it did not miss any opportunities to attempt to abolish it. In any case the balance was unfavorable for Catholics. In the clashes between the civil and the ecc-

⁷ Ibid., p. 322.

lesiastical authorities the church always got the short end of the stick. No small amount of bishops was exiled. The creation of new dioceses, the attention of the missions and the presence of representatives of the Holy See in Venezuela suffered the delays of a civil administration that became slower and awkward with such matters benefiting directly the Catholics but that posed no particular concern to the government representatives. It was time to end this straitjacket, or rather those chains, which held down the religious institution to the contingencies and vagaries of governments and partisan quarrels.

In 1958 Dr. Edgar Sanabria, a practicing Catholic and renowned university professor, was presiding over the Board of Government and had advanced talks with the Holy See in order to establish as modern law relations with the Venezuelan government. He was unsuccessful at the refusal of the Holy See to the Venezuelan thesis of only promoting to the episcopate those born in the country. Elected President Romulo Betancourt, on February 13, 1959, in his inaugural speech addressed the issue of the patronage and ratified the commitment of his political organization. Sanabria was appointed ambassador to the Holy See continued⁸ and talks continued. Finally in June 1964 Congress approved a "Modus Vivendi" or provisional agreement with the Holy See, giving a start to a relationship of freedom of both powers. In those negotiations had a lot to do the President Romulo Betancourt, the Apostolic Nuncio Luigi Dadaglio and the archbishop of Caracas José Humberto Quintero, who, by the way, two years ago had received the cardinal's hat, becoming the first Venezuelan cardinal.

The new statute gave legal status to a reality that in practice had taken its first steps. Henceforth the fields were delimited. On one hand Government should provide financial support for reconstruction of temples, Catholic education subsidy, emoluments for bishops and canons, and support for welfare works. On the Church was the tacit support of state institutions manifested by their presence in patriotic protocol acts and the support to the democratic system.

While in Venezuela Catholics enjoyed their new status within their social context, the universal Church was taking steps toward a profound transformations. As a matter of fact, Pope John XXIII posed an ecumenical council.⁹ Previous councils had achieved their goals, dictating creeds, canons, convictions or any other doctrinal decrees that provided interpretative "tips" for performing spiritual work. The Pope in this case thought of a more pastoral and evangelical council to renew the Christian faith and engage in a dialogue with modernity. In other words, to open the windows of the Church to the modern world.¹⁰

⁸ R. Fernandez Heres, 'Participación del embajador Edgar Sanabria en las negociaciones ante la sede apostólica para la firma del *modus vivendi* con la República de Venezuela' in *Primeras Jornadas de Historia y Religión. Homenaje al padre Hermann González Oropeza, S.J.*, Caracas 2001, pp. 271-292.

⁹ Most important was the fact that he gathered so large an assembly of bishops from around the world. In 1869-1870, in the First Vatican Council, only 750 had gathered, most Europeans, of whom no less than 200 in Italy. In 1962 only bishops of mission territories reached 800. Altogether, some 2,380 conciliar fathers gathered in San Pedro for the opening ceremony on October 11.

¹⁰ Quoted by H. Jedin, 'El Concilio Vaticano II' in H. Jedin, K. Repgen, *Manual de Historia de la Iglesia*, Tomo 9: *La Iglesia mundial del siglo XX*, Barcelona 1984, p. 168.

The task was difficult because the Roman Curia had become intellectually rigid and generally identified themselves with the concerns and the needs of the Universal Church. Meanwhile theology had become, in a way, too exclusive a matter of school, too separated of ecclesiastical practice and problems of everyday life. Catholicism, as expressed by John XXIII in his famous opening of the Council, had used excessive condemnation medicine and too little of mercy in its approach to modernity. The theology of the Church, its studies of the Scriptures and worship, and its perception of modern politics needed to evolve¹¹. With the shock of the opening statement, the council assembly became aware of the historical dimension of the moment.

In September 1962, a month before the opening of the Council, the Venezuelan bishops made public a comprehensive and complete document analysis, as they had never done so far on the national reality.¹² Venezuela appears as an eminently young country, half of whose population does not exceed 15 years old. The Church has been working to solve this important problem in educational matters but recognizes that is far from the desired results. The Christian community is called to participate with their generous contribution to establish more schools, and particularly Catholic teachers who work in the public schools have to commit to the word and example to improve the quality of teaching likewise attending religious education. Another issue addressed by the bishops in the document is the economics and draws attention to the fact that each year about fifty thousand young people reach the working age and that not a relevant number of them find employment that would allow them to satisfy, in a sufficient manner, their own needs and those of their family. On the basis of the Social Doctrine of the Church that defends private property, capital productivity for social ends, the dignity of work is stressed.¹³ The document could not end without the clarification of what they consider the limits of politics and the Church on the subject: *If politics means the game of political parties and their struggles for public power, neither the Church hierarchy nor heaven can be mixed therein. This a rule, imposed by the supernatural mission that the sacred ministers must enforce, whose faithful observance is absolutely necessary for the effective fulfillment of the apostolic work.*¹⁴ It is then the task of Christians to actively intervene in the issue and join political parties of their sympathies, provided that neither their ideology nor their methods, go against the faith and Christian morality.

From the historic pastoral of Monsignor Arias Blanco, no ecclesiastical document reached similar resonance. The press and international news agencies echoed this visibly. In the different parishes, in movements of the lay apostolate and in any other environments where the pastoral was broadcasted people felt motivated by that message

¹¹ There we read: (...) *the very serious problems we have to solve the human race does not change for twenty centuries since Jesus Christ is always center of history and of life, men or adhere to Him and His Church and enjoy property of light, the softness, the right order and peace, or live without it or act against, and deliberately remain outside the Church, so confusion reigns among them, harden relationships and living under threats of bloody wars.* Ibid., p. 1127.

¹² *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 1: (1958-1979), pp. 86-99.

¹³ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

that vibrated with the country's problems. It was exiting, at the same time, the proposed courses of action where Christians could take their own faith commitment along with the tasks of everyday life.

Upon opening of the Vatican Council II, Venezuela traveled to Rome with its 24 bishops, fifteen of them residential, four holders, four Apostolic Vicars and a prelate "nullius". The balance of the Church in Latin America and specifically in Venezuela, in recent decades, was seen as positive if its presence in the society was taken as a point of reference: its educational work, the organization and the work of evangelization and catechetical, although there were present a number of challenges that merited pastoral responses: the low dominical fulfillment, secularism and religious indifference, the penetration of the Protestant sects and the danger of Marxism. It became necessary, to combat these limitations through greater presence of community leaders in all sectors of society, the promotion of vocations to the consecrated life and the spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation of priests.¹⁵

Although the excessive clericalism still made the Church appear as consisting only of bishops and priests, and mistrust persisted towards the laymen and the lay apostolic movements directed by them, great excitement could be seen among both the laity and priests encouraged to implement the decisions of the Council. In almost all Venezuelan dioceses pastoral councils were being created that under the orders of their respective bishop planned the pastoral work, reviewed old methods and implemented conciliar measures. Dioceses and cities were divided into zones under the responsibility of teams of laity and priests working together in preaching, liturgy and catechesis.

In this new spirit, without state intervention, the Holy See created in 1965 three new dioceses: Barinas, Cabimas and Los Teques, the first and third corresponding to the states of Barinas and Miranda, and the second, to the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo. The following year, Maracaibo, Barquisimeto and Ciudad Bolívar were elevated to the status of archdiocese and in 1967 the Diocese of San Felipe, for the State Yaracuy and San Fernando de Apure, in that federal agency was created. Venezuela was in an accelerated process of urbanization. The leap taken by the country in the last fifteen years rendered almost all studies made on the bases of the 1950 census according to which the urban population stood at 58 percent. The 1961 census showed that the urban population had reached 67.7 percent and rural and fell to 32.5 percent. This reality posed to Catholics the need to reorganize. In and around Caracas, Archbishop Arias Blanco spurred the creation of new schools, colleges, and parishes in the poorer outlying areas, and so did the rest of the ecclesiastical districts according to their needs and limitations primarily based on the number of priests available.

The need to religiously attend a Catholic population ever growing and the growth of slums around large cities posed new challenges to the traditional pastoral centered on the parish as the defined geographical structure. Such challenges clashed with the endemic shortage of clergy and even though many Christians engaged in apostolic movements as

¹⁵ 'Carta Pastoral de Episcopado ante el próximo Concilio Eucuménico' in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 1, p. 82.

the Legion of Mary and Christian Courses were becoming aware of their own evangelizing responsibility, and not as concerned only of priests and nuns. In this context, and following the lines of Vatican II, the preaching and teaching insisted on the doctrine of "common priesthood of the faithful", which did not weaken or lessen the priesthood of priests, but instead, it enhanced it. Many parishes began to form pastoral councils who planned, along with the parish priest, pastoral actions concerning the child and adult catechesis, sacraments, and in some cases, even the administration of economic funds. But if the at internal communities that effervescence could be perceived, it was also a source of frustration and uncertainty the growing de-Christianization of society, religious indifference, and the magnitude of the tasks to counteract these evils.

MEDELLIN DOCUMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE POOR

The year of 1968 evokes times of opposition, rebellion and generational conflicts. In Venezuela, the consolidation of democracy, though threatened by the Marxist inspired guerrillas, the increase of industrialization and the increasingly sharp contrasts between the rich and the poor, without a doubt had an impact on the dynamics of the Catholic Church. Venezuela had, according to statistics of the time, 70 percent of population whose income was less than one thousand bolivars a month, out of which 45 percent earned less than five hundred bolivars in families of about six. It was known that a sector of the Venezuelan population was aware of its undeserved poverty, compared to another sector that enjoyed all the privileges and benefit.¹⁶

The Episcopal Magisterium was aware of the great social problems in Latin America since the 50s. Later, John XXIII encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961), contributed decisively to this realization in the analysis of concrete situations, in formulating urgent solutions, especially in matters related to land reforms and denouncing social injustice, being this last issue quite appealing to the sensitivity to the young, and upon which the fascination of Marxism was ahead. That experience of reflection and seeking of solutions to the problems of a continent mostly poor and in a situation of widespread injustice made the Latin American Church to rethink its own path on the foundations laid by Vatican II. Or put in another way, the implementation of the Council to the reality of the various countries of the continent. That was the purpose of the Second Conference of Bishops in Medellin (Colombia). Indeed, it was convened by Pope Paul VI in late August and early September 1968, immediately after the XXXIX International Eucharistic Congress¹⁷ of Bogotá, event of great significance for the presence of the pope, first Roman pontiff to visit Latin America.

By this time a wave of ideas stirred the Church as to the role it should play in the world of underdevelopment, dictatorships and capitalist exploitation. It was said that institutionalized violence on the continent could not be eliminated but with other

¹⁶ 'Vida Nacional', *SIC Journal*, 34 April 1968, p. 185.

¹⁷ The last one was celebrated in Mumbai in 1964.

violence, that of the oppressed. The “anti-establishment” had aimed their batteries towards the magisterium of Paul VI’s charging against the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* on Scripture (1965); *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus* (1967), the *Creed of the People of God* (1967), and the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, on the eve of his trip to Bogota. Paul VI was well informed about all these circumstances and knew where he stood, and his magisterium was confined to was to three major speeches on the “conference of development day”, delivered to 200,000 peasants and at the opening ceremony of the bishops. In synthesis the Pope dramatically described the situation of the continent; analyzed the solution and rejected violence and revolution as instruments of social change. The final document of Medellín contributed to increase the concern for justice, because it had a very vivid perception of the situations of injustice; revalued the mystery of poverty that the Vatican II had so much spoken of. He made no class options; he wanted to appeal more to the heart of the poor than to the world of the poor. Encouraged the development of basic ecclesiastical communities, not sectarian but in communion with the whole Church, gave value to the exercise of politics as a community service, and maintained a consistent and brave line of thought against abuse of power, in any of its expressions.

Within Venezuelan political context armed conflicts and a series of coup d’état attempts in combination with military sectors had no great impact on the democratic trend of the population. Neither did it prevent the transfer of government through free elections to the winning candidate Raul Leoni, a founding member of the same ruling party.¹⁸

Early in his term, the President received a pontifical decoration. The fact was not without captious comments and interpretations. But the action of the Holy See was not the canonization of administrative or political party, let alone the person of the president himself, but the recognition of the Venezuelan head of state, during the regularization of relations Holy See with a country whose population was predominantly Catholic.

After completion of the second period of *Acción Democrática* in a climate of mutual understanding and collaboration with the Church, the country was preparing for a new electoral race, and the bishops saw the opportunity to call for peace and the fulfillment of civic duty for love Homeland. They recommended to priests to not enter any party politics but to limit their calls to exhort their congregations to register and vote according to the dictates of their own conscience.¹⁹ Elections were won by the candidate of the *Partido Social Cristiano COPEI*, with a historical difference of about 30,000 votes.

The new government was faced with the challenge of fighting poverty and working for a style of participatory democracy with universal access to the same opportunities and benefits. To bring the Republic to fruition imposed profound changes in the structures of the distribution of wealth, education and the economy. But there was a country to pacify. In this regard, the Executive in the persons of the secretary of inter-

¹⁸ ‘Comentarios,’ *Revista SIC*, Vol. 275 (1965), p. 220.

¹⁹ ‘Exhortación Pastoral del Episcopado sobre deberes y derechos electorales’ in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 1. p. 163-164.

nal affairs, Lorenzo Fernández, the Secretary of the Presidency, Luis Alberto Machado and the President himself, Caldera said they intended to cooperate with the Board of Pacification created for this purpose under the presidency of Cardinal Jose Humberto Quintero. Not for no good reason was the Archbishop of Caracas on that committee. The Catholic Church represented by him was a prestigious institution, rooted in the country. Five archdioceses, fourteen dioceses, four apostolic vicariates and one prelate nullius covered the entire country with a number of 880 diocesan priests in over thirteen thousand parishes, 1,030 religious and over 4,000 religious Christian to the service of the Christian people.

THE HIERARCHY IN TUNE WITH THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

With the proximity of the campaign for the '73 election the episcopate issued a brief statement to remind citizens, as in the past, the right as well as the duty to vote freely for the sake of the common good, in accordance with the teaching of Vatican II. On June 73 the bishops address the nation again with the pastoral letter "Church and politics." In line with pre-election times it proposes the Christian community some reflections in the light of the ecclesiastical Magisterium. The hierarchy presented itself as a unifying factor, which is the fundamental requirement of their pastoral mission, which does not mean indifference to politics, as understood by such a search and action in all that tends to the common good of the country. It also recognizes the steps taken in recent years towards the order of peace, justice and development, but is everyone, especially the new rulers and representatives (members of deliberative bodies) to further deepen social action along with carrying out all structural changes to ensure more effective progress aimed at the benefit of all, but with special attention to the particularly disadvantaged and the marginalized. It could not miss, given the political circumstances, the condemnation of Marxism. The Christian cannot *accept Marxist ideology without contradicting their own faith; globally nor can adhere to the positions of Marxist analysis of man and society, without compromising substantial aspects of the same faith.*²⁰

By now the country had changed. On the political side democracy was consolidated, incoming a third presidential election, the guerrilla was exhausted and pacification was a fact. The two major political parties, *Acción Democrática* and COPEI, from the government or the opposition could reconcile their interests at times shameful, in a climate of freedom, pluralism and consensus. In the community of nations, particularly in Latin America, the country's democratic alternation was seen as a role model.

The substantial fiscal income mainly from the oil industry and the possibility of an increment of that income due to the rise of oil prices due to the growing global demand gave the impression of prosperity and economic growth. In fact that wealth not generated by the creative work of Venezuelans was brewing an easy lifestyle affecting

²⁰ 'Carta Pastoral Colectiva del Episcopado sobre Iglesia y Política' in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 1, p. 262.

the cultural, moral and spiritual values of the most privileged sectors of the population. Corruption in public administration and in private enterprise, although more discreet, along with wasteful spending, squander and luxury only served to widen the gap between this class of new rich and the vast majority of Venezuelans, whose immediate horizon appear quite misty. Meanwhile, within those marginalized sectors, the virus of discontent and frustration was being incubated.

With relation to the Church, however the balance was not entirely positive. Robust apostolic movements of the 60s already showed certain weariness and stagnation. Catholic education was questioned from the same Catholic educators as generating greater privileges for wealthier social sectors. In addition to the shortage of priests there was the decrease in number of those who came from abroad. The episcopate and the clergy, with the honorable exceptions that always exist, suffered from some delay compared to other nations of the Continent in current theological training in the implementation of well-structured pastoral plans, and in initiatives and creativity to meet the new needs and challenges in one type of mainly urban population, whose religious references became increasingly tenuous. One sensed a certain distance of the institutional church (bishops, priests and nuns) with the poor and young people, although in these areas many pastoral workers, priests, religious men and women made real efforts to insert themselves into marginal areas and articulate the work of evangelization with the needs and requirements of the young and the poor.

By 1976, the report of the Bishops' Conference with the Synod of Bishops in Rome next year, will reveal some achievements. Regarding priestly vocations there is a small increase, with about 655 students in five houses of higher education in the country. And an awakening of lay movements like courses, the Legion of Mary and the Renewal Movement in the Holy Spirit, giving impetus to the Christian life in the parishes and other ecclesial activity centers.

THE PUEBLA CONFERENCE

In 1976 the Pope announced to the XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) that he was willing to hold a third General Conference of Bishops. Paul VI died on 6 August 1978 and had convened the conference for October 12 of that year. His successor, Juan Pablo I, confirmed the date but his early death in late September led to adjourn the meeting. Cardinal Wojtyla, who took his predecessor's name, was elected, and determined that the conference was going to be held by the end January 1979.

The permanence of the Polish-born pope on Mexican soil was an apotheosis. More than 20,000 kilometers covered, seven cities visited, 36 speeches and millions of listeners. The Conference was inaugurated on January 28 and finished on February 15, 1979. The theme of the poor was his guiding principle and was inspired by the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI and in memory past history, near and distant Latin American Catholicism. The reception of the final document was in general very positive, despite

having being prepared and drafted in a conflictive church period due to some extreme wing of the liberation theology in trance of greater prominence in discussions of the assembly.

For Catholics, this conference and its conclusions pointed the way to project into society with a new evangelizing mission of meeting great challenges such as extreme poverty, capitalist hedonism and materialism of Marxist inspiration. The new challenges of modernity were there: the human, the preferential option for the poor and the young.

A Christian Socialist President had been Venezuelan head of government for two years. In fact, the 1978 election results had reissued the phenomenon of years ago with the election of Carlos Andrés Pérez: polarization, thanks to the formidable electoral machinery and overwhelming advertising. The Punto Fijo pact was fulfilled almost without any kind of resistance. First, the alternation in power second the business sectors, the military, trades, unions, academics and even the Catholic Church could coexist in the shadow of political power and each state received its share of the budgetary pie without major conflicts. However, compared to earlier times, in the beginning of the eighties are dark clouds on the horizon, although the oil basket almost tripled to exceed thirty dollars per barrel between 1980 and 1983. Paradoxically, in the midst of this huge boom, the economy showed no signs of health. With "Black Friday" sparked nationwide February 18, 83 with international reserves depleted. The escape of dollars, exchange control, disputes between the Finance Minister and Central Bank President, and in the last year of the government of Luis Herrera Campins, the sharp cuts in public spending, are just a few strokes of a largely absent light box. This explains why in the 1983 elections the opposition party triumphed, and the defeat was not worse thanks to the figure and prestige of Dr. Caldera, candidate "official" after the bitter infighting in COPEI. Jaime Lusinchi took over with 56 percent of the votes, against 34.5 percent to Caldera.²¹

The voice of the Church was felt in several times on national issues relating to public moral.²² On the occasion of provisions on television, highlight the media responsibility to society²³; and to mark the sesquicentennial of the Liberator's death, made an analysis of the situation in Venezuela from a Christian perspective.²⁴ In the latter document hierarchy put the nail on the head with direct language: *There is no true freedom when political leaders seem to put their party interests before of the interests of the nation. No genuine democracy where it is almost impossible to punish the corrupt and guilty.*²⁵

²¹ D.B. Urbaneja, *La política Venezolana desde 1958 hasta nuestros días*, Caracas 1997, p. 53.

²² See especially: T. Straka, 'Los obispos y el excremento del Diablo. La cuestión petrolera en los documentos del episcopado venezolano', *Espacio Abierto*, Vol. 12, N° 3 (July-September 2003), pp. 349-376.

²³ 'Declaración del Episcopado Venezolano a propósito de las recientes disposiciones sobre televisión' in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, pp. 15-18.

²⁴ 'Reflexiones del Episcopado Venezolano sobre el acontecer nacional' in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, pp. 27-32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

Regarding the ostentation and overspending in gambling, liqueurs and other excesses thanks to the abundance of oil revenues, and the ill-gotten wealth in some affluent sectors of society, the bishops said: *We cannot applaud such party, and such waste, or the ostentatious of the new rich. This is no way to build a nation. We have no right to import all, drink all, offering all the useless and superfluous, to waste or destroy national heritage, when there are basic needs we have not been able to meet.*²⁶

Once again, the Episcopal Conference expresses its sentiment on the situation in the country when the government of President Jaime Lusinchi is ending. It expresses nothing which has not been said before: The wealth has not translated into real integral development of man, but rather in social and economic inequalities, speculation, moral decay and unemployment. *This national problem takes place in an election year, when everything tends to become politicized exclusively and the struggle for the seizure of power opaque the objectivity of the onset, magnifying the dividing and making difficult the necessary consensus for the common good of the nation.*²⁷

Amid the generalized revelry episcopate messages sounded like a voice crying in the desert. Political sectors were engaged in other things; for the media those messages and that of relevant figures of intellectual and academic fields, coinciding in the same approaches, diagnoses and prognoses were no longer news. Never a forum where problems were posed... Perhaps in the Sunday homilies a priest would talk to his parishioners.

It was necessary, at least in the Christian communities, the sound of an alarm, to awaken from this lethargy. The alarm came indeed with the coming of the Pope John Paul II.

NATIONAL MISSION, THE PAPAL VISIT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Between 26 and 29 January 1985 the country was visited by Pope John Paul II. The event was prepared intensively for a year in what was called the "National Mission". Indoors, Christians needed to renew the faith, make an effort to conversion and transformation, as Venezuelan society was in crisis and the role of the Church needed to be more authentically redefine. To implement this goal, from the parishes, religious communities, schools, apostolic movements, courses on religious formation, action workshops, spiritual retreats and various activities were organized to motivate the congregations on the spiritual meaning of the Pope's visit and awareness of their responsibility to the proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ. The slogan was "Renew your faith." On the afternoon of January 26 the Pope arrived at Maiquetía Airport. The President received him with an emotional speech on behalf of the Venezuelan people. An enthusiastic crowd accompanied him along the way to Caracas. The agenda for the first day consisted of first an official visit to Palacio de Miraflores and in the evening the enco-

²⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁷ 'Declaración de la CEV ante la crisis que vive el país' in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, pp. 100-106.

unter at the Cathedral of Caracas which was called “builders of society.” At the end of the day the illustrious visitor had to appear at the balcony of the Apostolic Nunciature, his place of accommodation, to impart a blessing to the crowd gathered there. On the morning of June 27 John Paul II celebrated a Mass on the Esplanade de Montalbán to an impressive concentration of people as had never gathered in the country before. The same day, he presided at the Eucharist in the grounds of the old airport of Maracaibo to the crowds from the western states and did the same the next day at “La Hechicera Sector” in Merida. That night he spoke at the Olympic Stadium of Caracas to more than forty thousand youngsters. He then went to Ciudad Guayana, working region par excellence.

It was a real marathon, given the short time available to encompass the major populated areas of the nation. This explains why he made no time in the schedule to visit the Votive Temple of Our Lady of Coromoto, the Patroness of Venezuela. On the afternoon of January 29 in Maiquetía the Pope said goodbye with a “till later”.

For Catholics that visit was a shock to renew their faith in Jesus Christ and an incentive to continue some pastoral plans started with the National Mission, especially in the field of evangelization. The media stressed how anecdotic those maelstroms of immense concentrations were; not enough, however, the essentially religious message of the Pope: the truth about Jesus Christ, the Church, the renewal of public and private morality, the defense the institution of marriage and the condemnation of abortion.

The hierarchy capitalized everything and proposed what was called “Permanent Mission. Joint Pastoral Plan: 1886-1992”, an ambitious project of evangelization, to respond to changing times, in order to prepare the V centenary of the evangelization of the continent, an event to be held in Santo Domingo in 1992.

The framework for conducting the Permanent Mission was in line with the guidelines of CELAM especially in the priority to evangelize the culture, and of the Document of Puebla for its emphasis on the poor as a priority concern. The project sought to redefine the role of Christians in Venezuelan society.

“Ad extra”, the Church needed to review its relationship with the state. In the thirty years of democracy a partisan and representative model had arisen as the sole and legitimate upholder for the rest of the citizens. But these organizations, instead of expanding the possibility of participation were becoming control machinery of unions, neighborhood organizations, and trades for the sole purpose of taking advantage of the power for themselves. The great advances in education and public health were recognizable but a closer look at the set of achievements raised serious doubts about the effectiveness of the system, given the deterioration of life especially in the poorest sectors of society. President Lusinchí (1983-1988) came to power onboard of social unrest because of the high cost of living, rising unemployment, and the currency crisis left by his Social Cristiano predecessor. His party guaranteed him the majority in Parliament, control of the unions, the sympathetic of trade unions and a friendly attitude from the media. However, at the end of his term, even though he still enjoyed popularity, poor administration, influence peddling and corruption continued as in its heyday, impoverishment hit the weaker sectors with the erosion of the purchasing power of wages,

unemployment, housing shortages and the practical inability to get out of that state of poverty, became more dramatic.

The episcopate repeatedly stated their views without getting any practical results. Now a more leading attitude was demanded of the “builders of society” as called in the Puebla Document²⁸ of the workers, businessmen, politicians, intellectuals, artists and educators, who in the end have the highest social responsibility.

However, in recent years the Church was quite critical of the great problems of the country, and this posture is not the result of any partisan posture or a technique, in the best of cases, to propose concrete solutions. “In analyzing the reality we do not presents ourselves as experts in economy, political or social matters. Neither do we stand as judges but rather from the heart of the nation itself we assume its destiny co-responsibly”, written in 1983.²⁹ “We, as pastors of the Church have accompanied the social process in Venezuela and we have referred to it in recent documents and pastoral letters. In the light of the Gospel and the social teaching of the Church, we have analyzed the crisis we are suffering and its moral roots and we call for urgent correction of social problems in the country, expressed two years later, in view the serious problem of unemployment”.³⁰ In 1987, to mark the international year of housing, after a thorough analysis of the problem in Venezuela they expressed the following: *Aware that our mission is not to offer technical solutions, we cordially invite all men of good will to put forth their capabilities and initiatives towards directing their activities and the institutions they preside so as to take a decisive action to facilitate the benefit and right of housing for those who do not own one.*³¹ On the occasion of the thirty years of democracy, in a detailed analysis of the undeniable progress but the serious flaws in the economic and social order, the episcopate concluded by saying that the balance they have done can be rough, “but wishes to be constructive. Only if we face reality without deception, we can lay hope for the future”.³²

„Ad intra” of the Church also imposed the corresponding “*mea culpa*” despite enjoying undeniable prestige and stable and harmonious relationships with other social institutions of the nation.

In January 1984, on the occasion of the National Mission, the episcopate said: “As the current crisis is largely due to the weakening of our Christian conscience, both personally and socially, we as Bishops of the Church assume this as a challenge to our pastoral responsibility, and we call on all our fellow citizens, believers or not, to an interior

²⁸ Number 823. For this case we quote: *III Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano (Puebla). La evangelización en el presente y en el futuro de América Latina*, Ediciones Trípode, Caracas 1979.

²⁹ ‘Declaración de la CEV ante la crisis que vive el país’ in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, p. 100.

³⁰ ‘Mensaje de los Obispos al pueblo venezolano ante el grave problema del desempleo’ in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, p. 130.

³¹ ‘Construirán sus casas y vivirán en ellas. 1987. Año Internacional de la Vivienda. Mensaje de los Obispos de Venezuela’ in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, p. 178

³² ‘Declaración de la Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana a los 30 años del 23 de enero de 1958’ in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, p. 197.

renovation that must necessarily project itself into social life and especially in the field of family".³³

At diocesan and parish level, to the length and breadth of the country Permanent Mission Committees were constituted made up of priests, religious and lay people committed or not in the various apostolic movements like Cursillo, the Legion of Mary and the Charismatic Renewal movement. The plan, in its various phases, began to take shape, its objective, somewhat ambitious, was to evangelize and spiritually transform Venezuela.

Although the increase in vocation to the priesthood and religious life, both male and female, was a fact and emphasized a new image of the priest and religious closer to the congregation, more oriented towards the service of the more marginalized communities a threat loomed among Catholics: new movements inspired on Protestant evangelism, original of the United States. These religious groups had more than half a century in Venezuela, both in small communities inland and in parts of Caracas, but in recent, however had proliferated, mainly in the marginal sectors of Caracas and in major cities. But this was a reality with which he had to live with. Now the times of official religion had past. Facing the Christians was the challenge of decisively dealing with their testimony of life according to the faith in Jesus Christ and making it patent in their life attitudes, without fear or complex, largely as did the faithful of the Protestant churches.

The official churches preach, when not dealing with strictly religious matters, transited the way of moralizing exhortation. And so it made clear on the occasion of the start of the second presidency of Carlos Andres Perez. The current economic and social crisis has its origin in the "Acute moral crisis." The rosary of evils, such as capital flight, external debt, both public and private, smuggling, trading in influence, drug use, is but the expression of a moral crisis. Also the loss of the sense of honesty and the value of work as a source of wealth, are attitudes that confirm the diagnosis. The remedy is a return to the practice of civic and Christian virtues. These ideas are repeated in the 1990 Lenten whose stage gives rise to reflect once again on the moral crisis of the country, from which all Venezuelans, including the Church, were responsible.³⁴

It was necessary; once again, to face the challenges of delivering to the society the message of Jesus Christ a different and innovative. Within Latin America, the Church was preparing to celebrate a new meeting of all bishops.

DOCUMENT OF SANTO DOMINGO

Indeed, the event came out of the initiative of Pope John Paul II to promote "new evangelization". Two circumstances influenced the decision: first, the twentieth anniversary of Medellin and the tenth of Puebla and the need for an assessment, and second, the consultation of the Holy See to the American Bishops on the desirability and opportunity

³³ 'Renovar al país por la conversión del corazón' in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, p. 117.

³⁴ 'Exhortación Pastoral "Reconciliaos con Dios"' in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, pp. 229-233.

for a IV Conference and the integration of it in the global CELAM Plan 1987-1991 in order to celebrate the fifth centenary of the evangelization in 1992. Indeed, the IV Latin American Episcopal Conference was held from October 12 to 28, 1992. It was a pastoral confrontational meeting, with no mayor ideological confrontations. Dialogue, communion and collegiality reigned. This is especially appreciated in the unity of faith and pastoral action against common problems of Latin America: poverty, foreign debt, political crises, and drug trafficking. The final document: *New Evangelization. Humanistic Promotion. Christian Culture*³⁵ proved to be a pastoral reflection from the experience in parish communities, grassroots, in the family, in the unity of the spirit and diversity of ministries and charismas. It was a point of arrival and departure. The last five hundred years of evangelization, and evangelization for the future.

THE POLITICAL CRISIS

After the euphoria of the celebration of the fifth Centennial, Venezuela was heading towards a minefield. Obviously the economic remedies to change the reality could not come from religion. The neoliberal “package” of the government of Perez, unleashed asleep demons which ended with the “*Caracazo*”, that 27 of February, 1989 and the fierce repression of the military as the only plausible way to maintain the “constitutional order”. Politically, there was no desire to apply any remedy. The ruling class continued keeping the distance from the people and sure of itself. Meanwhile political parties and politics as such were being demonized by the persistent criticism of the media, for whom there was no difference between institutions and individuals, perhaps precisely because one of the major weaknesses of that democracy was to strengthen the people who ran or manipulated it rather than the institutions.

Amid the confusion and crisis, the two sectors that emerged favored by public opinion were the military and the Catholic Church. The first, for its advocacy for democratic institutions, although fractured in its heart, which became evident after the coup attempts. And the second increased its prestige due to the critical attitude of the episcopate and the groundwork of many priests and nuns, from their schools, education and training centers, clinics and human promotion work particularly in the marginalized sectors of the population, the hardest hit by the economic crisis, now repressed because of the political crisis.

The two coup attempts against President Pérez in 1992 added fuel to the political instability. The action of the Attorney General's Office as the prosecutor of the President for the use of secret account created the matrix of opinion on the inconvenience of a president who was not a guarantor of political and social stability.

In March 1993, the Supreme Court admitted the prosecution of Perez, and later he was removed from the office by the Congress. As expected, in the midst of the uncertainty, many Venezuelans called for a national dialogue, and the episcopate, at the re-

³⁵ *Nueva Evangelización. Promoción humana. Cultura cristiana*, Caracas 1992.

quest of several political and civil institutions, offered a series of proposals to the country, on the basis of the acceptance of some hard truths that political leaders had not heeded: the public malaise, discontent and riots *are not just a product of destabilizing groups, but also of the lack of effective responses to the needs of the people*.³⁶ Confidence in the democratic system would only be regained *to the extent that the present government, the rest of public powers and the political parties make effective the expected changes, punish those who have harmed the national heritage and provide the people a real stake*.³⁷ At the same time, the episcopate made clear its sole mission of pastoral service, guaranteeing their identity and autonomy with respect to determinations of a technical nature relating to other levels of society.

The national agreement for a peaceful and democratic solution had the following conditions: greater involvement of all sectors of society, transparency and credibility to political institutions; fast on government reform, determined fight against corruption and impunity; severe State fiscal discipline, increased production and new jobs, to put an end to the waste and reorganize management of state institutes and enterprises, social security for the poorest; renewal of the union leadership, and ethical – cultural training – with participation of the media and educational institutions.³⁸

But a medicine – so bitter to the taste of the sectors involved – remained in the bottle of the good intentions and general principles. The Church then stepped forward and sponsored the “National Civil Society Encounter”, organized by the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, in May 1993.³⁹ The initiative responded to a guideline of the document issued by the IV Conference of Bishops in Santo Domingo: the fundamental task of Christians or primary mission is evangelization, and it implies working for human advancement and justice. So the meeting at Universidad Católica gathered, in the context of reconciliation and solidarity that the country was claiming, a large group of experts. They presented to their own abilities their proposals to a large audience, in five specific areas: political transformation, economic transformation, social transformation, the transformation of the judiciary and the transformation of education, topics upon which there were not few coincidences as well as profound differences. The point of the event was to identify the one and the other in order to reach consensus and specify the following tasks.⁴⁰

Of course the press echoed the event, but among the dismissal of Perez, the appointment of historian Ramón J. Velasquez as the new chief magistrate to complete the constitutional period and the candidacy of Rafael Caldera outside his party and supported by what was called the “*chirípelo*” those judicious reflections from the experts were only appropriate for publication and reading of scholars, if not forgotten on the shelves of libraries.

³⁶ ‘Propuestas al país’ in *Compañeros de Camino*, Vol. 2, p. 281.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 281-282.

³⁹ *Encuentro y alternativa, Venezuela, 1994*, 2 Tomos, Caracas 1994.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Tomo 1, pp. 92-93.

The waters returned to their cause with the victory of Dr. Caldera. He received only 29 percent of the vote, abstention, something that was not known before in Venezuela, reached 50 percent. There was no strong party support for the Government, as the coalition that allowed his victory was the sum of the party "*Convergencia*" formed at the last minute by people sympathetic to Caldera, the "*Movimiento al Socialismo*" and a smaller groups that always thrived in the shadow of the once great parties. There were many things to tackle immediately, first: to stabilize the political situation, in other words, take the boat out of the storm, then: the refinancing of debt, reforming the tax system and the social benefits system, and reducing bureaucracy and current expenditure.

NEW REALITIES OF THE COUNTRY

On May 7, 1995 in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Pope John Paul II elevated to the honor of the altars Laura Evangelista Alvarado Cardozo, Mother Mary of St. Joseph. This event, of great spiritual significance for Catholics, took place in a national crisis situation of political and economic institutions that demanded greater awareness of honesty, solidarity with poor social sectors, and the active presence of Christians with their testimony life in national affairs. The work and the memory of Mother Mary were certainly an incentive to experience charity and service to those who need it.

That year the Episcopal Conference and the President made an invitation to the Pope to inaugurate in February 96 the new National Shrine of Our Lady of Coromoto. The beatification of Mother Mary and the visit of Venezuelan bishops to Rome for the "*ad limina view*" contributed to the positive response of the Supreme Pontiff.

There was no intense national missionary operation implemented or operation that stopped the rhythm of what was being done through the various dioceses and vicariates, as on previous occasions. On the other hand, the start of the school vacations further slowed down any mayor summons, and the simultaneity with the electoral campaign made difficult the desirable spiritual preparation. It was conceived, as expressed by the President of the Organizing Committee, for the visit to be a space to open new paths to creative participation, and as a great missionary moment directed to call upon the.

Pope John Paul II arrived at Simon Bolivar International Airport of Maiquetía on Friday, February 9, 1996, at 4 and 30 pm. Back in Caracas the Pope greeted and blessed the Catia prisoners and was received at the presidential residence of La Casona by the Head of State and the Diplomatic Corps. He spent the night at the Apostolic Nunciature. At eight o'clock the next morning he flew to Guanare where he celebrated the Eucharist facing the National Shrine of Our Lady of Coromoto. Back in Caracas in the afternoon he met at Teresa Carreño Theater with the "builders of society." On Sunday morning February 11, he celebrated Mass at La Carlota airport, in front of a crowd of parishioners from all regions of the country. That afternoon, on Avenue Los Heroes spoke to young people, and then he went on the pope –

mobile to Maiquetía airport. At 6 and 45 pm the plane took off via Rome. Perhaps the most significant events during the fifty hours visit in Venezuela were those in Catia and in “Teresa Carreño”. In the first approach he took a closer look to the inhumane world of prisoners. There, before important personalities and in front of that building, sad emblem of the national prison drama spoke to the “ignored by society”, and made an urgent appeal to the Administration of Justice to respect, in that and all other detention centers, living conditions consistent with human dignity and to promote the rehabilitation and training of prisoners.⁴¹ At Teresa Carreño, the Pope reminded representatives and leaders of the social, cultural, political and economic life, that they are at large responsible for the creation of an ever better Venezuela for the integral wellbeing of each and every member of the national community. And he alerted them with the following words: “Do not forget that the process of material impoverishment often leads to moral and spiritual impoverishment of individuals and social groups, especially youth and adolescents. This raises a serious crisis because of the absence of values in the field of ethics, justice, social harmony and respect for life and dignity”.⁴²

In all his public appearances, including the meeting with civil society, the Mass of blessing of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Coromoto in Guanare, in the Eucharist in La Carlota, and the meeting with the youth of Avenue *Los Próceres*, the Pope referred to, in addition to its religious message about Jesus Christ and the Church, some national issues such as embezzlement of public funds, the flight of capital, the increasing differences between social strata, the violence of the State security forces, drug trafficking and its penetration into social classes, based on the ideas uttered by the national bishops in recent years.

A few days after the second Apostolic visit of John Paul II to Venezuela, the Twenty-First Special Assembly of the Bishops’ Conference met with the participation of priests, religious and laity, representatives of all the national Catholic community, to study and apply the message the Pope had given. They analyzed both the social reality in its three dimensions economic, political and cultural, as well as the ecclesial reality, particularly with regard to new religious movements, and “sects”, popular religion, pastoral agents and services, the church organization and pastoral planning.

While the enormous capacity of John Paul II call was undisputed, past the maelstrom, with immense human capital available, the church had to undertake a genuine renewal for the Church as an institution could not continue with the same patterns of the past. It had won credibility in the various sectors of society, but the slogan of the Papal Visit (*Wake up and reacts!*) imposes internal application to the Christian community itself. More dialogue within the Church, more evangelistic work against widespread phenomenon of weak faith and little religious training in a family generally weak, subjected to the harmful effects of divorce and irresponsible parenthood.

⁴¹ “La Iglesia no os abandona: abrid el corazón a Cristo y aceptad el desafío de la conversión”. Saludo y bendición a los reclusos del Retén de Catia, in *Iglesia Venezuela*, 91 (1996), p. 14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

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Agustín MORENO MOLINA, Caracas 1952, Professor, Doctor in History (Central University of Venezuela), Master's degree in History of Venezuela (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello), Specialist in Dogmatic Theology (Gregorian University of Rome), Bachelor of Theology (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana). Affiliated to the Centre for the humanistic Research and Training (CIF) of the UCAB. Director of Graduate Education in civic values and Professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Education and the Faculty of Engineering at the same university. Author of: *Entre la pobreza y el desorden. El funcionamiento del gobierno durante la presidencia de José Gregorio Monagas* (UCAB, Caracas 2004), *La Universidad de Ayer y Hoy* (UCAB, Caracas 2005); y José Gregorio Monagas. Biblioteca Biográfica Venezolana, Vol. 43, El Nacional, Caracas 2006). Co-author of: *Nuevas Propuestas para la Educación en Valores* (Paulinas, Caracas 2001), *Educación para vivir. Cuatro enfoques desde la educación en valores* (Paulinas – UCAB, Caracas 2003) and *Actualidad de los valores en Venezuela*, (Funtrapet – UCAB, Caracas 2005), and *Globalización: visiones y desafíos* (Funtrapet – UCAB).