

Comment

A little more trust

'Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails', said a Jesuit who had spent many years in Latin America, 'and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hands in his side, I will not believe.'

He was answering an old friend, a Dominican, who, waving in front of him a copy of the Pope's letter of 9 April to the Brazilian bishops, had been telling him how important the letter was, how it gave strong hints of a shift in Vatican thinking on the role of the Church in the Third World, how it compelled us to see the Pope himself in rather a new light. 'No,' he went on, 'it was his visit to Nicaragua that was the real test. The Church is pretty good at standing up for the poor in countries with strong oppressive right-wing governments, but what does it do for the poor in countries with freely elected popular governments, countries where something substantial might be achieved?'

We will see. Some of us have become deeply disillusioned during these past few years, as we have watched the grip of the Church's hard men of the right tighten, and none of us can tell what the historians will finally make of this recent letter, which has been received by so many of Brazil's bishops and theologians with so much jubilation. But it would be a big mistake for us, men and women of 1986, to underplay its significance. In it the Pope says that liberation theology is 'not only opportune but useful and necessary', a 'new stage' in the Church's theological reflection on society, and he calls on the Brazilian Church to help to bring a truly Christian liberation theology to the rest of Latin America. He speaks bluntly about the challenge of 'the two Brazils'—he does not sink into 'really-we-are-all-one-community' rhetoric. He does not dilute what it means to have a 'preferential option for the poor'. He extends his blessing to the 'comunidades eclesiais de base', and conveys his confidence in what the Brazilian conference of bishops is doing. There are no more dark warnings of 'deviations'. A year ago, when relations between the Vatican and the Brazilian Church were so tense, how many of us would have guessed that John Paul II would ever be writing to the most go-ahead conference of bishops in the world things like this?

If we dissect the letter and put the small print under a magnifying glass we can easily say that there is no evidence in it that the Pope has changed any of his basic convictions. Familiar ideas of his are here. His distaste for the class-war, for example. (He praises the Brazilian bishops because their love for the poor is 'not exclusive nor excluding but preferential'.) And his general abhorrence of ideological systems—'unbridled capitalism' as well as collectivism. And his insistence that clerical and lay roles should not be mixed. (He approves of the Brazilian bishops for not abandoning their episcopal duties to take

up urgent lay tasks.) Not-so-familiar ideas of his are here too—ideas found in his Encyclical of 1981 on human work, *Laborem exercens*. And, above all, he makes it very clear that his welcome to liberation theology only extends to such as is ‘in complete harmony with the fruitful teaching contained in the two Instructions’, by which he means *Libertatis nuntius*, the ‘critical’ Vatican document on liberation theology of 1984 (see our Comment of September 1984), and the decidedly better but excessively abstract and European ‘positive’ document, *Instruction on Christian freedom and liberation (Libertatis conscientia)*, which appeared two months ago (CTS £1.00).

There are, then, no novel *ideas* in the letter. But what makes an important Vatican document important is not the small print but the big gesture—the very fact that it is written at all. What is novel about the letter, what makes it so much more interesting and significant than *Libertatis conscientia*, is a change of attitude to people—to these Brazilian bishops, more exactly. On Brazilian affairs the Pope has until recently put his trust only in a few individuals, men very different in outlook from the vast majority of present-day Brazilian bishops. The result has been a lot of unnecessary suffering and friction and misunderstanding. It is trust that oils life’s wheels. If there had been a little more trust in the world the Chernobyl fiasco would have been less of a disaster. Readiness on the part of the Pope to trust a rather wider group of people can only do the Church good. He was clearly profoundly moved in his last meeting with the Brazilian bishops, in which he had chosen to adopt a rather more open style of relating (one he now hopes can be repeated in his meetings with others). It was as if he suddenly discerned the thoroughly Christian roots of the concern of these bishops for the poor, and responded to his intuitions.

There is one important thing about trust, however, which time and again has been overlooked or misunderstood in the Church. Trust does not abolish conflict, but is the basis of fruitful conflict. At the moment the six-year old Vatican investigation of the American moral theologian Charles Curran is drawing to its close. What is at stake is whether a Catholic theologian can ever be permitted to dissent publicly from non-infallible Church teaching—whether the Church should (indeed, must) sometimes give its trust to people who seem to be disagreeing with it.

In every area of church life we encounter the problem of trust, or lack of it. The Church calls for our trust, but it is humanly impossible to give trust where no trust is given. The Pope, in his relations with the Brazilian Church, has made an important gesture himself: he has extended his own trust. But trust, like anything alive, has to grow. Will he withdraw that trust when cold winds blow? Will he revise his ideas about what sort of men are suitable to be made bishops? What will he say when he visits Cuba? We do not know. But just possibly something really new has been born, and our job now is to try to nourish it.

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