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Confronting the challenge of Catholics who leave the Church

by Honorio López Alfonso, C.M.

In the 1970's, the non-catholic confessions had 10 million followers in Latin America. By the year 2000 they will be 140 million. The desertions among Hispanic immigrants in the United States continue along the same statistical line. More than 90 percent of these people belong to the popular classes, poor people in the majority. As a goal, the Amanecer Program (started by several denominations) hopes to capture 50 percent of the population of Guatemala by next year. For other countries the goals are less optimistic, but no less ambitious. In Chiapas, Mexico, the catholic population went from 91.21 percent in 1970 to 67.62 percent in 1990 and the decrease has continued in these last few years. In the 1980's, the missionary agencies of the churches and New Religious Groups (NRG's) from the United States and Canada invested a billion dollars each year in support of different non-catholic denominations. Today that figure has doubled. In Mexico, the Jehovah's Witnesses alone have more than a million publicists. The magazines, books, pamphlets cassettes, videos, etc. of this group alone outnumber by far those of the Catholic Church in the country, even if we include parish bulletins. In the Federal District of Mexico there are 390 bookstores dealing with esoteric subjects. How many exist in Madrid and Zaragoza? (In the wealthy countries, astrologists are three time more numerous than chemists and physicists.) Here, and this is only one more example, the denomination called the Mexican Church of Christ—they only have ten thousand members—is preparing a whole team of communicators for the day when religious programming will be possible on the national television networks.

In the days of the Reformation, the nescient Protestants won the battle especially by means of books, pamphlets, catechisms, fliers and other things made possible by the still new and marvelous printing press. Today, the New Religious Groups (NRG's) and the sects are also winning, not in small part, through the huge possibilities of the media.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that the cause or the blame for the desertions by simple Catholics is the sects or NRG's. It hurts me to say it, but I am sure that the fault is our own, the Church, and it seems to me that Providence is challenging us through these new groups brimming with life and fundamentalism, evangelism, Methodism, pentecostalism and conservatism (shake contents well before using!). They have good intentions—or, at least, they do their work. In a confusing world, which is increasingly unjust and culturally fragmented, they offer security, participation, strong and warm human relations, hope of getting ahead, a morality with clear guidelines, alive liturgies and—the Bible! (Also indoctrination, manipulation, strong marketing, submission, exploitation and other ingredients that the critics and reality highlight.)

Last summer I participated, as a Catholic layperson, in a Mass in a church in Madrid de las Asturias. In a beautiful, but half-empty, church, an educated and thoughtful celebrant, delivered a prepared homily, but we, the laity, were an audience. As I left, I was sure that the mummies of Guanajuato would not have participated any less than we did, except for our moving to receive communion. It is an example that can be found in most of our countries and which, although it does not happen in the parishes of our province, may not be the exception. The cold, doctrinal reasoning, clericalism, catechesis as a formality, the minimal participation of the laity, the limited presence of women in different ministries, cheap morality, the routine, the unbelievable religious ignorance, the scarce inculturation—especially among the poor--, the ridiculous wars between semi-conservatives and semi-progressives, the near-sighted contentment and pride because we have a few active groups which consume eighty percent of our energies, the minimal use of the media...none of this is the fault of the sects or NRG's. We could also add, without trying to complete the list, the practical unconsciousness of Catholics, whether they are members of the hierarchy or tie salesmen, when faced with the significance of the new religious offerings to the majority. Moreover, the large ecclesiastical structures seem, at times, like old panting dogs incapable of climbing a hill. And the small structures are like little enclosures with the narrow but friendly horizons of home. The NRG's and sects bear none of the blame for this. If they are unhealthy (because of manipulations, doctrinal distortions and anti-ecumenical proselytism) that does not make us well (because our spirit and zeal have been anesthetized). And

“our inheritance is the poor” and the evangelization of the poor. From 1620 until today, the Huguenot de Montmirail—faced with the spectacle of the ignorant and abandoned poor—asks Monsieur Vincent, “And you want to convince me that this is under the direction of the Holy Spirit?”

On the other hand, the patient reader might be asking himself, “And what does this long (but partial) development have to do with the pamphlets of Mission XXI?”

“What solution can we give, Monsieur Vincent?,” (XI,669)

Our reality inevitably affects us if we are not deaf to its voice. The confrere who works in the prisons will see this world as the criticism of social systems and he will see it with real faces. The confrere who teaches will perceive, from that perspective, the deterioration of many families, the loss of values in society and the difficult marriage between placing tuitions within the means of the poor and sustaining the quality of the means of education and teaching. (There are also many positive things in each case which always outweigh the negative.) My lot fell in another part of reality: the media (La Milagrosa-Yelda) and the needs of young people (cursillos and retreats) first; then, in Mexico, the formation of our students (philosophers and theologians). Next, I was allowed to work completely in the world of the poor, for whom I had come, in two well populated parishes in the neighborhoods of Netzahualcoyolt, and from there—and later from the provincial house—I published the magazine Mission XXI. Finally, I had the blessing of working among the Hispanic immigrants in Los Angeles for ten years. I also had the opportunity to give missions and mini-missions in Mexico and northern California. Neither in my times at Yelda nor in the seminary in Mexico did I have my

eyes open to the painful reality of the religious ignorance of the masses or the attacks by the sects. I knew something on a theoretical level, but very little, and none of this was incarnated in concrete faces. Subsequently—except when giving retreats or formation weeks to the sisters and priests—I experienced this problem everywhere: the poor are not evangelized, the poor are abandoned to their fate (which the system imposes on them). There are attempts at renewal—small communities, family and youth movements, biblical circles or their equivalent, alive parishes, renewed catechesis, basic ecclesial communities, missions, institutions for helping and human promotion, pastoral wisdom from the bishops, theological discussions for the erudite—but the majority are abandoned. And the structure of ministries in the Church has something to do with this. The retreat from the creative world of culture and from the means of communication which vulgarizes culture has something to do with this. But no less responsible is the general insensitivity and lack of consciousness towards the means of communication, the lack of preparation among pastoral agents and the lack of will where the decisions are made for creating experts in communication and media which can reach the masses. Yet, how can we reach the masses today if not through the media? Does anyone know a miraculous formula that can do it? What can we few followers of St. Vincent do? In the time of our founder, Paris was a city and the other populated areas were smaller. The laborers were comparatively numerous and the means of communication in their infancy. Moreover, illiteracy was the norm. Today we can laugh at the tele-evangelists and take a certain delight in their scandals and manipulations, but this does not resolve our problems. We can write off as fanatics the publicists of the Jehovah's Witnesses, but this does nothing to help the masses. We can belittle, from our posture of superiority, the soap-operas and talk shows, but they, some of them, are getting to the masses whom we call (rhetorically?) our inheritance. Or do we lack confidence in the power of the Good News through the media? (When I become aware of someone in the province putting Vincentian texts and news on the Internet, it fills me with joy and gratitude.) If it can be expressed through Platonism and Aristotelianism or even through the newer Marxism, why cannot the Good News be expressed through the culture of the media? In the Bible—and not only there—the Holy Spirit also works by means of writing. John Paul II speaks in RM about the new areopogi for evangelization. The first one that he points out (not so new, certainly) is that of communications and he laments the fact that the media have been left to the initiative of individuals or small groups and enter into pastoral planning only as a secondary level. How do they enter into the planning of the C.M.?

The Media and the Masses who are scarcely evangelized or are not evangelized at all

If I have given a résumé of personal or biographical data—minimal and ridiculous in themselves—it was to explain the dreams and ambitions of Folletos Mission XXI. The ups and downs of my life put me in contact with these two realities: the poor masses and the means of communication (in their poor version). The magazine Mission XXI was a

modest attempt to connect the language and the concerns of these masses with evangelization by this medium. But, the problem was its small circulation. So I planted—with the competent authority—the possibility of creating popular pamphlets with a larger circulation (this was at the end of 1982), but the suggestion was not considered. In 1984, with the collusion of the owner of a print shop—who waited for payment until I had distributed the copies—I put out, anyway, forty thousand copies of a twenty page pamphlet, which were distributed in a few months. (Of course from this simple pamphlet, which was an expansion of an article from the magazine, other editions were made: in Mexico, el Servicio a la Iglesia AC; in Puerto Rico, the tireless Fr. Sádaba put out 150.000 copies; and in Honduras, Fr Jose Luis Echarte published it. I cannot remember the number of copies.) Still, I am part of a community and if it does not assume as its own these tasks, freeing someone for the job, how could the work continue? I was not interested in pursuing something which might be more a personal whim than a mission. With the first pamphlet I—as positivist as Comte and the fanatics of the Vienna Circle—wanted to verify whether things were as I thought, or subjective dreams. The verification did not turn out badly and confirmed overwhelmingly the hypothesis, but it convinced only me. With these and other circumstances, during the ten years I had been in Mexico, I returned to Spain at the end of 1984.

After several months of a renewal course, Fr. Rafael Sáinz and his council accepted me into the province of Zaragoza and I was sent to Los Angeles. I had a small treasure of knowledge regarding the popular Mexican world and connecting with those dear people from Talpa was easy for me. I worked there—with the exception of a few months in San Francisco—from 1985 until 1995. But, once again, due to the reality of the attacks by the sects and the ease with which not a few simple Catholics are confused because of the reasons mentioned before, there arose in me the impulse to try something.

In fact, many works of catechesis, formation courses in the faith, week-long workshops, house by house missions, etc. arose from the same concern. But, as always, the people whom one touches are, in any case, a minority, even in a populous parish like Talpa. I continued with this concern like a person who has a promise to fulfill. In January 1995 I returned once again to Mexico for retreats with the sisters. One evening, three or four young Mexican priests invited me to dinner at a restaurant near Coyoacán. Among them were Fr. Benjamin Romo, then the visitor, and Fr. Manuel González (presently the visitor). Amidst the food and spicy sauces, we spoke of the problems of the country, pastoral problems, the religious ignorance, the sects and the abandoned masses. There was born the decision to present to Fr Carlos Esparza, provincial of Zaragoza, the possibility of attempting a collection of popular pamphlets in Mexico, with my coming to these surroundings to begin the project.

Finding the means, producing the pamphlets and creating networks

I came to Mexico at the end of 1995 to the house at León, Guanajuato. I came with three clear commitments with regard to the pamphlets: 1) finding economic support, 2)

writing and publishing the pamphlets, and 3) creating a network of distribution so that the pamphlets could be placed with the people in whom we were interested. With publications the same thing can happen as with direct pastoral work: contacting very few people and thinking that everything is going well because a few fans sing our praises.

What perspectives are opened by the pamphlets?

The printed pamphlets constitute the first part of the job. With time, when we are doing about the tenth one, we will begin a line of cassettes and, later, videos. These are the plans. Moreover, possibly this year, I will begin another small collection of the pamphlets with only half the number of pages. The reception has been very positive in the places where they have arrived. The sects do the preparatory work for us: they upset the people, move them, leave them with questions which they do not know how to answer. And so the people are more open and committed to obtaining the pamphlets. (In León, the first Sunday that we put the first two numbers on sale, they bought 518 copies and that is in a small community which is not even a parish.) There is some hope that the other provinces of America will publish and distribute the pamphlets in their respective countries, as Fr. Sádaba already does in Puerto Rico.

I should also say that the pamphlets are not about the sects or against them. They are for simple Catholics and about the great themes of our faith, about its social dimension, and about the points on which the sects sow confusion in the masses of the poor. This is the objective: evangelization, not controversy, even if I do use some controversy for literary purposes. Some parishes are already using the pamphlets as materials for groups and for missions. I know of a nursing school which uses them for formation in the faith, and I know other stories, but the goal here is not to continue telling edifying anecdotes.

That is the way things stand for the moment. From January 19th until the 24th, we had an official visitation in Los Angeles. I participated in it, but also took advantage to visit some pastors about the pamphlets and I had an interview with someone who works in the newspaper, *La Opinión*, and who presented me with the possibility—with good terms—of announcing the pamphlets in the paper. Moreover, I have ready for the printer a flier in color to make the pamphlets known (Spanish for Mexico; Spanish and English for the United States). But, do you know how much it costs for an envelope, flier, two or three copies of the pamphlets, sending them to a thousand or two thousand places and paying the postage? These and other similar decisions cannot be made if the continuity is at risk.

Finally, for those who have put up with this up to here, I give you my gratitude. I also thank the authorities who have made possible this enterprise and those who continue supporting it. In Mexico, the confreres help me a lot, especially the provincials previously mentioned. I am also grateful to those who work in the parishes and with parish groups and the Vincentian lay groups.

Ozanam, who struggled through the press of his time, said to his friend Cournier in February 1835: “The humanity of our time seems to me like the traveler mentioned in the gospel. It also, while it follows the route which Christ has pointed out, has been assaulted by thieves, robbers of thoughts, by evil men who have taken the best of its possessions: the treasure of faith and love; they have left it naked and unconscious, weeping and bewildered along the road...” Today, the same thing happens to the abandoned masses, but by more subtle and effective means. Religious ignorance, the sects and their offerings, the lack of pastoral attention, the esoteric programs, the economy of sharks dressed as neo-liberals, the scorn and ridicule of their faith by the greater part of the media are different forms of this assault on the poor masses. In the Retiro Madrileño [a great plaza in Madrid], there is a host of tables with amulets for all kinds of superstitions, and radio programs offer the same. What can we do to bring the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth to these masses? The pamphlets do not resolve the problem; they are only a simple attempt to support other attempts.

(translated by John P. Prager, C.M.)