

MDD-11  
An Ecclesiastical Statistic.

June 13, 1965.  
Bogotá, Colombia.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366, Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

"In the mission territories there is a high proportion of vicarios and prefectos apostólicos of foreign extraction (eight Spaniards, one Frenchman, one Dutchman and one Italian). ... 51.1 per cent of all priests working in the missions are foreigners."

Gustavo Perez & Isaac Wust: La Iglesia en Colombia.

"Convention regarding Missions. January 29, 1953. His Holiness Pope Pius XII and the President of the Republic of Colombia, Excelentísimo señor doctor Roberto Urdaneta Arbeláez.

Article 11: ... Civil officials appointed to work in mission territories will be acceptable to, and known to be favourable to, the Missions and the priests in charge. ... a properly supported complaint of the head of a mission will be sufficient cause for the removal of any government employee."

Convención sobre Misiones.

"The Constitution did exist, but its existence meant nothing in practice, because the country was living under a permanent State of Siege since November 1948. So the President was lord and master of the whole country, and "reasons of state" were for a new Convention."

Francisco López: Los Factores de la Revolución.

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The town was hot, dusty and hideous. The taxis were flying black ribbons because two taxi-drivers had been murdered the day before. The wireless was broadcasting a series of alarmed telegrams that the alcalde had sent asking for more troops and detectives. A critical situation, he said. Certainly an aesthetic disaster, this untidy cattle and contraband station, little in it old, and all the new looking old as soon as built, and never finished. A slow street trade in hair-curlers and plastic sandals, chemical drinks and dangerous ice-cream. There were only two beautiful things in it. One was an old and miraculous Ecce Homo — miraculous that it should have ended up in such a place, but a suitable representation all the same. The other was the Bishop's Palace.

This was a large, fresh, colonnaded building. There were lemon trees and a fountain in the patio. Perhaps it was only the swish of clerical garments, but there seemed to be a breeze. A monk was sent out to talk to me while I waited for the Bishop:

I was just passing through? Then no doubt I would be wanting a few bottles to take with me, there was excellent whiskey to be had. Everyone was very content in this particular region. Every campesino had his case. The abundance of whiskey was a matter of general local pride. Gin? He had not seen very much gin pass through lately. Now there was wine, and the Bishop had indeed just granted some to a good man who had pleaded for it most fervently. It was scarce at the moment. But it was bad for the liver anyway in this hot climate. Most people drank whiskey. Excellent, plentiful whiskey.

A pleasant conversation with a pleasant monk. But I had to see the Bishop, as the Bishop was the only person for miles around who could change foreign money. He owned a drug-store and a stationer's shop as well, but foreign exchange was a good sideline.

He sat at his desk, behind telephones and typewriter, files and paper trays, the outward, progressive signs of the inward and colonial church. Behind him on the wall hung a heavily spiritualized portrait of himself, the intent eyes fixed on me softened by the painter and turned upwards to heaven, the burly frame made decently frail, the vigorous beard a saintly straggle. An awkward poor man stood in a corner twisting his hat in his hands, for the Bishop was dealing with dollars and bigamy at one and the same time.

"Yes, yes, and what is the rate today?"

I gave him the official rate from the morning newspaper.

"Ah, but I'm not a Bogotá bank! The street, what are they giving in the street? This isn't Bogotá."

He turned to the peasant:

"It doesn't matter what she did. You shouldn't have done it all the same. It's a grave sin. You should have known. There's no excuse, I don't want to hear excuses. Wait a minute."

He named me a rate well below the official level, a rate that would have found no takers in the street. I only had cheques, and the street rate was for bills only. He assured me that his rate was very good, and that I was very lucky.

"Besides," he said, "I have to send money to Rome." He paused and looked at me apprehensively. "You are a catholic, aren't you?"

On my way out I asked whether the Bishop had any children. The monk replied that as far as he knew he had not, for the Bishop had come to Colombia rather late in life.

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I dedicate this incident, as I could dedicate others far worse, to the Federación Internacional de los Institutos Católicos de Investigaciones Sociales y Socio-religiosas, which has managed to publish two works on the Colombian church without once mentioning the quality of the clergy. A surrealist achievement to which, as it says in the front of each book, nihil obstat. The simple thesis they maintain is that there are not enough priests.

There are far too many bad ones. In travels that have enabled me to make a fair random survey, I have met more bad than good. Fortunately for the church, the reputation of good priests, rare as they are, spreads further than the reputation of bad priests, who are considered a natural affliction to their parishes. This has the effect of making good priests seem more numerous than they really are.

The spirit of the Colombian clergy is still in large part the spirit of the Spanish colonial church. This is clear beyond any disguise in the missions — the Convention still refers to mission settlements as "reductions". It is clear among the domineering rural clergy who end all arguments with "I am the Word of God." It is clear in the obsession, sometimes a source of fat profits for the priest, with buliding churches, whether they be needed or wanted or not.

"What shall I do when I get there, Your Grace?"

"But my son, why do you ask? Build, of course, build!"

Build and dominate and look out for the interests of the Church.

"Colombia," said Pope John XXIII without being very specific, "is the scandal of Christianity." The political record of the church here is drab. Its finances are secret and a matter of general suspicion. The progressive clergy are divided among themselves and too often lead their own little movements like so many holy caudillos. The radio schools of Sutatenza, the one contribution of Colombia to progressive Christianity in Latin America, have lost much recently in competition with cheap transistors and commercial programs; the large - and uncontrolled - subvention they receive from the government should be better spent elsewhere.

The historical achievement of the Colombian church was to make one nation of many races and many regions. On the fringes of the country the missions continue to take lands and languages away from the Indians, but that work is nearly complete. In most of the country the spirit that animated it is no longer justifiable.

Ecclesiastical statistics mislead: it is not more priests that are needed, it is different priests that are needed.

Yours sincerely,

*Malcolm Deas*

Malcolm Deas.

Received in New York June 18, 1965.