

Roman Catholics, Protestants call for closer cooperation and understanding in Latin America

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Calls for closer ecumenical cooperation and understanding have been issued by Latin American church leaders in a region not known for Catholic-Protestant ties.

Archbishop Oscar Rodriguez, the newly elected president of the Roman Catholic Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) used a mass celebrating his 25th anniversary as a priest to foresee "a largeness of heart to open our arms to our brothers in the Evangelical churches in healthy ecumenism."

Meanwhile, Argentinian Methodist theologian Jose Miguez-Bonino called for "religious equity" throughout the continent.

"It is necessary to see Latin America as a plural religious society," Miguez-Bonino told a group of students and theological leaders in Lima, Peru. "This is the hour to pass from religious tolerance and freedom of worship to a practice of religious equality among all religious expressions on the continent," he said.

The Methodist theologian said that a sign of wider ecumenism would be to cease talking in absolute religious terms which reflect only one religious experience, that of the Roman Catholic Church. "When you presume the existence of only one religious body among the Latin American people, you give rise to privileges which limit, and in many cases exclude, the activities of the other religious groups," he said.

Miguez-Bonino said that such cooperation should begin without losing the unique views which Protestants bring. He called on society and the Roman Catholic church to recognize the validity of Protestant viewpoints. Such cooperation would affirm democracy and the unity of the people of Latin America, he said.

Bishop Rodriguez issued his call for wider ecumenical contacts before 25,000 people at a May 21 mass in the national stadium in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

"It is Christ only that we serve," he said. "As the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II said, in the third millennium of the church, we must be united, not separated."

"The call from these church leaders is real, but I don't see any implementation," said Rev. Lenin De Janon, pastor of Quito's Tabernaculo de la Fe (Faith Tabernacle), a large evangelical church.

"To say something with words is very easy," De Janon said, "but to put them into action takes a lot of work."

Protestants see Roman Catholic calls to ecumenism as a ploy to control the Protestant Church in Latin America, De Janon told NNI. The evangelical pastor charged that Protestants would be

forced to enter into ecumenical relationships only on Catholic terms.

"Catholics will never give up the spiritual leadership of the Pope," De Janon said, a position which he asserted is unacceptable to Protestants.

The pastor said he has no problem working ecumenically with Roman Catholics on social concerns such as hunger and poverty issues, but in what he termed "spiritual areas", he said that Protestants cannot cooperate because to do so would compromise their beliefs.

Rev. De Janon said that the calls for ecumenical cooperation are "beautiful declarations", but the reality is impossible for Protestants.

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