Reflections on the First Inter-American Meeting of Religious

By Tom Quigley

When I mentioned to Ted Keating that the first Inter-American Meeting of Religious 35 years ago had been organized largely in the U.S. Catholic Conference Latin America Bureau, he invited me to put down some recollections as a then Bureau staff person. I am delighted to do so. This will be a fairly personal account, given the time that has passed and that the written record of the first meeting is both spotty and, occasionally, simply wrong.

In the impressive memorial of the proceedings of the sixth Inter-American Conference of Religious held in Santo Domingo in 1994 and published by CMSM and LCWR in April 1995, a brief chapter is devoted to “The History of the InterAmerican Conferences of Religious of the Americas.” The first meeting in 1971 is said to have been an outgrowth of the 1969 Inter-American Bishops Meeting in Caracas, and was organized to “forge ties that would bind collaboration among women and men religious of the Americas.” It is said that the discussions centered on themes of “pastoral conditions in Latin America, the position of women and men religious within the societies of the region and the pastoral consequences of this position.” A nice sentiment, but hardly reflective of the tenor of that meeting in Mexico.

The Inter-American Bishops Meetings were originated by the Latin America Bureau, modeled in part on the very popular CICOP meetings that began in 1964. CICOP—the Catholic Inter-American Cooperation Program—was a broad popular education effort designed to inform and, if possible, inspire people, especially students in Catholic schools, about the realities of Latin America. CICOP included, and eventually became identified with, an annual conference that attracted several thousand people to its gatherings, first in Chicago and later in Boston, Washington and, for its final meeting in 1973, in Dallas. The force behind CICOP was the NCWC Latin America Bureau, later the USCC Division for Latin America.

Having persuaded the US bishops to meet with their Council of Latin American Bishops’ Conferences (CELAM) counterparts at an annual meeting along with the Canadians, who had joined as members, the IV Inter-American met in Caracas in 1969, at the very time that Governor Nelson Rockefeller was due in Venezuela. For over a year he and his team were on a fact-finding tour for President Nixon that ultimately produced the Rockefeller Report on the Americas. Student unrest and opposition to his visit had boiled over to public demonstrations, forcing Rockefeller to cancel his visit to Caracas. US journalists sent to cover him there were thus left without a story. Learning that bishops from around the hemisphere were in town, they swarmed to the site of the Inter-American Bishops meeting, but were rebuffed.

A difference in approach, a result in part from this meeting, led to USCC handing over the responsibility for planning the Inter-American Bishops’ Meetings to the General Secretary’s office. Meanwhile, however, Fr. Fred McGuire, CM, who had joined the Latin American Bureau as Liaison for Religious, was assigned to organize the First Inter-American Meeting of Religious Superiors.

Fred McGuire and Fr. Mike Colonnese of the LAB, Hector Samperio of CENAPI, the Mexican Church’s center for indigenous affairs, Franciscan Luis Patino of the Conference of Latin American Religious (CLAR), Chilean Sacred Heart Fr. Manuel Edwards, CLAR President, and very few others put together an elaborate design for religious superiors to examine together the
role of foreign religious in Latin America at the start of the ’70s. CMSM and CMSW (pre-LCWR) were participants but it was organized desde abajo, from the south.

The tenor of the meeting, and of the time, can be glimpsed from the book-length report of the conference, *Integration of North American Religious in the Church of Latin America.* The year 1971 was the 10th anniversary of the CMSM meeting at Notre Dame when Msgr. Agostino Casaroli, substituting for Archbishop Samoré, first proposed that U.S. religious congregations aim to have 10% of their members working in Latin America by the end of that decade. He brought that same message of religious orders tithing to the Canadian Conference of Religious meeting days later.

As a result, hundreds of priests, brothers and sisters had flocked to new apostolates in the south, inspired by the call of John XXIII. By the end of the ’60s, however, doubts had arisen about the haste with which some had gone to Latin America, about inadequate training in language and culture, about what might today be called the outsourcing of American parish life to places with very distinct histories of church life and practice. And in 1967, in the very week that the fourth CICOP was being held in Boston, *America* magazine had published Ivan Illich’s scathing attack on what he considered a poorly conceived and wrongly executed mass mission to Latin America in “The Seamy Side of Charity.”

At that time, in the light of Vatican II, and especially in the light of the 1968 Medellin meeting of Latin American episcopates, it was felt that a critical examination of the North American religious mission to the south was called for. Thus, the first Inter-American Conference of Religious Superiors, organized and funded by the Division for Latin America, was held in the Jesuits’ Casa Javier in Mexico City, February 8–12, 1971. All the major presenters with one exception were Latin Americans. The exception was Bishop Albert Sanschagrin, OMI, of the Diocese of Saint-Hyacinthe in Quebec, co-president of the Canadian Bishops’ Latin America commission and former missionary in Chile. The only other bishop present was Don Samuel Ruiz García of San Cristóbal de las Casas, president of the CELAM missions department.

Reading the conclusions and recommendations (nearly 50 pages in the pocketbook edition I have) published by the Canadian Conference of Religious, is to return to a past that can never be repeated. There was certainly a high degree of sure footedness on the part of the Latins that they were on a new, progressive, right track, while the errors and mistakes were traced mainly to the Northerners. The Latin Americans most strongly criticized were their own bishops who were seen as all too eager to get priests and religious from the north, regardless of sufficient training or appropriate placement. From today’s vantage, some of the rhetoric sounds dated and more than a little ideological.

There is no ignoring, however, the very real problems that this “mission to Latin America,” as Jerry Costello titled his oral history of the era, encountered. Improvisation, doing things “the American way,” the lack of viable criteria in both the sending and receiving of personnel, non-insertion into the local pastoral plan, the concentration or bunching up of North American personnel, and the negative attitudes said to be expressed by many North American religious: an attitude of superiority, reinforced by the availability of funds from the north far in excess of what local priests and religious could access; a ghetto mentality; and even a fear of integrating fully into the Latin American situation. The negative impact of the “affluence” of the North Americans during the ’60s came up at several points.

Reading the full text makes it sound still harsher: “The Church in Latin America has suffered from religious colonialism from the start, first by the Spanish and Portuguese and now by the North Americans.” (It should be pointed out that the term was always used literally as including the Canadians as well.) They described their church as one in search of its identity, a church in the process of liberating itself, seeking to serve all the peoples of Latin America, but especially the poor and marginalized. They are said to be developing a new theology according to the insights gleaned from the Council and Medellin, and are unabashedly committed to “the Revolution,” something that was the common currency among many in the Church in those days, a revolution, however, that they insisted should not be violent.
In a more positive vein, the conclusions spoke of the need for new structures in the Church, for
efforts at conscientization. They stressed the importance of base ecclesial communities and
promotion of the laity and talked of new roles for religious. And they came up with an elaborate
series of recommendations, grouped by category of institution. To the Church in Latin America,
there are nine recommended actions; to CELAM, eight; to CLAR, seven; recommendations to the
North Americans were divided into three categories: to major superiors, 13; to Conferences of
Religious, five; to the North American religious, seven. There were, finally, five
recommendations regarding future meetings of this kind, and three recommendations for better
collaboration at the regional, national and continental levels.

The question was directly addressed: Does Latin America still need missionaries? The answer
given was that the need for religious, including foreign religious from the north, is a continual
one, but under certain well-defined conditions. The meeting concluded that a smaller number of
religious, better selected and better prepared, would better serve the needs of the Church of Latin
America. Unforeseen was the sharp decline over the coming years in the number of US and
Canadian religious, as well as diocesan priests and lay missionaries, going off to serve in Latin
America.

One prescient recommendation of the 1971 meeting, however, is still being met. The meeting
urged the North American religious to exert pressure on their own governments with the goal of
effecting better policies towards Latin America. Indications of that are present in the reports of
subsequent Inter-American Meetings of Religious and in the ongoing work of both CMSM and
LCWR.

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