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Book Review: "How Latin America Saved the Soul of the Catholic Church" (Cleary, 2009)

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Jayeel S. Cornelio. Review of Cleary, Edward L., *How Latin America Saved the Soul of the Catholic Church*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

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Edward L. Cleary. *How Latin America Saved the Soul of the Catholic Church.* New York: Paulist Press, 2009. iii + 220 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8091-4629-1.

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Published on H-LatAm (May, 2011)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo

The “Soul” of the Latin American Church Contested

In his book *How Latin America Saved the Soul of the Catholic Church*, Edward L. Cleary attempts to dispel the image of a Pentecostalization of Latin America by arguing that in fact the Catholic Church in the region is more vibrant than ever. To him, journalists and other writers have been captivated by the success stories of Protestant churches, which give the impression that the Catholic Church has been dramatically losing its members and waning in influence. To make his case, Cleary enumerates the achievements of the church in the latter half of the twentieth century. He argues that the church as a whole enjoys greater public confidence than any other social institution, develops new theologies, encourages the participation of lay missionaries, contributes to the ongoing democratization process, and trains and sends missionaries abroad even while it struggles with its limited number of clergy.

Thus, the main contribution of the book lies in being able to profile and articulate the progress of the contemporary Catholic Church. In doing so, the book is mainly journalistic, covering all the pertinent facts that offer a comprehensive overview of how the church is faring in Latin America. In light of this, the main audience of the book is likely to be not so much the well-versed observer of religion in the region as the everyday believer. So, although the book is listed under “Latin American Studies,” which suggests that it is mainly academic, it should also be considered pastoral. As the blurb on the back cover states, it aims to “inspire you with renewed hope for the church.” Catholic readers will be encouraged by Cleary’s claim that their church is not retreating in any way at all, much less going in the secularizing direction of its brethren in the West. The message is clear: the Catholic Church at the turn of the century is alive and well in spite of having had to face au-

thoritarian regimes, rapid urbanization, and the rise of Pentecostalism.

Nine of the ten chapters of the book highlight an activity that demonstrates the overall vitality of the Latin American church. The Catholic Church is conceptualized in its broadest, even reified sense, which includes church leaders, theologians, religious organizations, and even ordinary Catholics who have one way or another contributed to the activity being discussed.

Cleary argues that Latin America has saved the soul of the church by first and foremost strengthening its current membership, which remains formidable. Catholics in Latin America constitute more than half of the global Catholic population, and Cleary notes in the introduction that perhaps those who eventually leave Catholicism are only nominally religious in the first place. Explaining this point are at least three chapters devoted to how the Catholic Church has developed and maintained a missionary mindset. It has successfully brought laypeople into service in the church through parish-based small Christian communities and even Charismatic groups. Apart from this, evangelization takes place at two levels: among indigenous groups and outside Latin America. Cleary recognizes the role of 1.2 million lay catechists operating through such organizations as Catholic Action, and of key figures, such as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement of Father Marcelo Mendonça Rossi, who have reached out to new converts in innovative ways—indigenous and otherwise. The author also draws our attention to what he considers to be the Latin American church’s coming of age—the fact that after five hundred years, it is now able to train and send missionaries around the region and to other countries. Maryknoll and the Legionnaires of Christ in Asian countries, for example, have

carried out outreach and medical missions. Cleary claims that such a missionary impulse, in spite of its perennial shortage of clergy, challenges the view that Catholic revival in Latin America is a mere reaction to the Evangelical upsurge. Evangelism abroad shows to Cleary that Catholic-born Latin Americans are learning to take ownership of their faith and their respective local churches. In addition, evangelization, especially at the local level, allows ordinary and less religiously socialized Catholics to understand their religion better.

More than through ordinary evangelization, Cleary makes the case that the Latin American church saved the Catholic soul by emphasizing “the poor and the vulnerable” in its various activities and theological reflections. Drawing from the social teachings of Vatican II and the Medellín Conference (1968), the Latin American church has adopted the viewpoint that poverty is an evil that needs to be eradicated. Catholic schools and missionary activities have been redesigned to allow for the greater participation of the poor. And think tanks and faith-based initiatives were established to help in community development projects. The Jesuits, for example, have set up the Centro de Investigación y Acción Social to conduct socioeconomic research.

The kind of theology developing in Latin America, Cleary affirms, is deeply contextualized in its social environment, and it is for this reason that the church has come to welcome its own inherent cultural diversity. Catholics, for example, have found expression of their spirituality in a “marketplace of spiritual well-being,” which includes Afro-Brazilian spirituality, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, and even conservative religiosity (p. 45). In “embracing diversity,” the Catholic Church in Latin America has facilitated the emergence of an indigenous church with local theology and practices (p. 70). Such themes as care for the earth and the liberation of the poor, black, and women have become salient.

Finally, Cleary shows that Latin America “saved the soul” of the Catholic Church by being at the forefront of social change. To him, the ills of authoritarianism and industrialization in the latter half of the twentieth century have been challenged by the active role of the Catholic Church. Latin America is known, for example, for its modern-day martyrs like Bishop Romero who fought and died for human rights. And for almost two decades until 1990, the Vicariate of Solidarity directly challenged the military

government in Chile. Today, Cleary suggests that the church’s ongoing commitment to human rights is seen in how it goes after corrupt officials and in its protection of indigenous peoples. In the post-authoritarian period, the author points out that the Catholic Church has maintained a key role in educating the public to keep any form of military government from taking power again. This was, for example, the purpose of the Brazilian Bishops’ “Way to the New Millennium” at the turn of the century. The Catholic Church has been involved in “peace-keeping and mediating” efforts, too (p. 151). It has organized and supported transitional justice efforts, such as the Interdiocesan Truth Commission, which investigated and recorded the ethnocide committed by the Guatemalan armed forces even though this led to Bishop Gerardi’s murder. In the democratization process, the church believes that “injustice had to be recognized; then reconciliation could follow” (p. 157).

Cleary achieves his objective of demonstrating the vitality of the Catholic Church in Latin America, but not without glaring problems, especially to an academic readership. While the author has drawn from historical and theological material, news articles, and his own personal writings as a Latin Americanist, the text is not so much academic as it is journalistic and pastoral. My immediate concern deals with the author’s tendency to reify the “Latin American Catholic Church” itself, as if it were an institution without internal tensions. On several contested issues the book is silent. For example, Catholic leaders did not immediately challenge authoritarian governments in the 1960s. A case can in fact be made that certain episcopates were complicit with the government. And liberation theology was another contentious issue that did not get the support even of some key bishops as well as many sectors of the poor. Cleary does not answer his question whether the option for the poor was a “failure” since it has been mostly the poor who have shifted to Evangelical Christianity (p. 105). Beyond liberation theology, there are other equally pressing issues of the day, which are not given consideration in the text, such as women’s emancipation (*mujerista* theology is mentioned only in passing) and the accompanying concerns of sexuality, celibacy, and the entry of women into the priesthood. In view of all these, the very “soul” of the Latin American church remains contested.

Along similar lines, the book has overlooked how soul saving is a battle not just within the Latin Amer-

ican context but also within the larger institution of the Catholic Church itself. Put differently, from whom (or what) is the soul of the church being saved in the first place? Pentecostal Christianity seems the conspicuous suspect, but we cannot be so quick with our conclusion. In a way that subtly contradicts the rationale of his work, Cleary notes that Pentecostal Christianity is “a valid form of Christianity” (p. 9). A few other issues come to mind instead. For one, the controversies of liberation theology will always be part of the Latin American problematic. Cleary notes that when John Paul II supported the renewed evangelistic thrust in Latin America, critics viewed it as being meant to silence liberation theology. If liberation theology defined the character of Latin American Catholicism as siding with the oppressed, what do we make of its institutional rejection by the Vatican

itself? Is the institutional leadership the antagonist after all?

From a comparative standpoint, my final criticism of the book is that it fails to engage or even mention the condition of Catholicism in the developing societies of the global South. Although the book is mainly concerned with Latin America, the ongoing development of Catholicism in the region is not solely confined to it since the preferential option for the poor and evangelization have been adopted by many Asian churches, for example. Churches in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore, and South Korea, among others, have called for social justice in the developing world, but not without having to face contestations from within their ranks, the state, and various other sectors of society.

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