

## WITNESS TO CHRIST IN LATIN AMERICA

*Rev. Bertil Ekström*

### **Introduction**

There is a lot to say about witnessing to Christ in Latin America. I will concentrate on some practical aspects. In the statistics the continent is considered Christian with a majority of the population belonging to the many Christian traditions. In practice, however, regular church attendance is probably around 30% of the population.

There is full religious freedom in most of the Latin American countries today, and a fertile soil for all kinds of religious beliefs and expressions. In Brazil we use to say that “if something is established somewhere on the globe on Saturday evening, it will also be introduced in Brazil on Sunday morning”. It is possible to establish anything you want to and the proliferation of sects and extreme movements, both those that call themselves Christian as well as others, is a concern to many of us.

Today Latin America has, however, one of the largest and strongest Christian churches in the world, still with an outstanding growth in many of the different denominations and traditions. We could talk about revival movements within the Catholic, the Historic and Traditional Protestant and Evangelical churches and also among newer Charismatic and Pentecostal movements, particularly among lower middle-class and poor people.

### **Three characteristics related to the theme:**

1. Christian witness in Latin America today is holistic and basically all churches have the kerygma dimension walking hand in hand with diaconia. Credibility in society demands an integral approach to people where spiritual, emotional, physical, relational and social needs are met and taken seriously.

2. We lack a united stand as Christians in many issues and the lack of unity among the different Christian expressions is certainly a hindrance for greater impact on society and on our governments. As you all know we face high rates of corruption, violence, social injustice and today also a tendency in some countries to dictatorial governments. A question we often raise is how can it be that the Church is so big and our influence on society, including different levels of leadership, media and governments, is so weak? There is certainly an important lack of discipleship and a dichotomy between life in Church on Sundays and life in the community during the rest of the week.

3. In spite of earlier tensions between the different Christian traditions and the visible difficulty that we have had to work together there are signs of improvement and concrete steps to closer co-operation. One example is the Fraternity Campaign this year, focusing on Financial Issues and Responsible Stewardship, initiated by the Brazilian

Conference of Catholic Bishops but also supported by other Christian Churches. Another example are the Evangelical Alliances that gather both “Ecumenical” and “Evangelical” churches, by the way, a distinction that does not make much sense for us in Latin America. There is also a theological reflection in a dialogue between representatives from different ecclesiastical backgrounds – a theology on and of the road.

Let me mention one practical Example of witness to Christ in the Northeast of Brazil:

One of my colleagues and friends in Fortaleza, Northeast of Brazil, Jorge, could be a good example of how Witness to Christ happens in Latin America today. Born in a poor region of the country he had a personal experience with Jesus Christ when he was a teenager and soon felt called to be a full-time minister. After theological studies he came to this small congregation in the slum area of “Dois Irmãos” (Two brothers) in the outskirts of Fortaleza. He realised soon that preaching the Gospel and making disciples of Jesus would not be successful without considering the entire situation of people in the neighbourhood. There were no schools in the area and he started first a pre-school in the backyard of the church and alphabetisation courses for adults. The school started to grow and today they offer quality education from pre-school to secondary level, with support from local authorities. Being a community of poor people, many of them without permanent jobs and living in sub-human conditions, a programme was also started, with help from the south of Brazil, to build and renovate houses, provide clean water and improve the sanitary system, giving people jobs and better living standards. The former slum area Dois Irmãos is not the same anymore. The witness to Christ continues with a holistic ministry, preaching the Gospel of salvation and transformation, praying for healing and for God’s help and acting in different areas of community development, following the example of Jesus Christ and echoing his words in Luke 4:18-19. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”.

## **Conclusion**

Is Latin America a Christian continent? Does it need missionary work? That was the question raised at the Edinburgh 1910 conference and the understanding of that conference was that Latin America did not need any further missionary investment from outside. The statement, however, was made without participation of Latin American leaders and others decided on their behalf. Latino voice was not heard. Six years later, Latin American leaders met in Panama to analyse the situation in the continent and differently from the conclusion at Edinburgh, Latin American was considered, by them, still a needed mission field. Panama 1916 was followed by two other conferences, 1925 in Uruguay and 1929 in Cuba that reinforced the same conclusion.

What is the situation today? There are still many who have not yet been reached by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, such as around 200 indigenous tribal groups, immigrants from many nations and a growing secularised middle-class that still need to hear a clear and living witness to Christ.

We celebrate the growth of the Christian Church in our continent, not so much in terms of numbers but the increasing desire of seeing the Kingdom of God coming to our countries and the rest of the world, with an impact that has positive consequences on society, transforming individuals and communities, but also participating in the multi-cultural choir that worship the Lamb and the King, according to Revelations, with a hope of an eternity with the Lord.