

Aggressive Apologetics: A Growing Phenomenon in Latin America.

by Gustavo Amell Sanes, ST

What is the relationship between Catholic and Protestant churches in Latin America today? In many circles this relationship is still tense due to historical problems between the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations that “for the sake of the truth” struggle to get along. We cannot generalize the situation and say that the relationship between Catholics and Protestants is the same in every context. For example, while Catholic and Protestant churches in the United States disagree on a number of issues, there is a valiant effort on both sides to foster ecumenism, particularly on issues pertaining to scripture and social justice. However, this spirit of ecumenism does not exist in many places. In most Latin American countries the increase in religious movements, which are indistinctively called “sects,” has become one of the greatest challenges for the Catholic Church. A number of these sects are considered by many to be “fundamentalist” groups.¹ In 1990 during the IV Plenary Assembly in Bogotá, Colombia, the Catholic Biblical Federation (FBC) proposed the promotion of a solid formation in biblical studies to assist the faithful in properly interpreting the Bible. At the same time the FBC denounced “the threat of fundamentalism and [...] deal with it in an appropriate way, that is, without ignoring the principle of religious freedom but safeguarding values of Christian evangelization and diverse cultures.”² Even though there have been efforts to educate people in biblical studies and ecumenism, the average Catholic and Protestant consider the relationship between the churches to be strained because of the constant verbal attacks exchanged between large number of members of these churches. In some cases, sermons are used to diminish and attack the other denomination. By including insults and condemnatory statements in their sermons, preachers attempt to discredit a particular church before their congregation while often claiming the condemnation comes from God. The situation is worsening because of the use of social media. Videos, memes, pictures, audios, and other type of social communications are often used to speak one group’s version of “the truth” against other churches.

1 Florencio Galindo, *El Protestantismo Fundamentalista. Una experiencia ambigua para América Latina* (Estella, España: EVD, 1992), 19.

2 Galindo, *El Protestantismo Fundamentalista*, 19.

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The Bible and its interpretation, as one of the main reasons for the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, has gained increased relevance throughout the years. Among the members of the Catholic Church in Latin America, there is an increasing desire to study the Bible and to discover how it can give light to their lives. However, a good number of participants in Bible-study programs stated that they were only interested in learning more about the Bible because they wanted to be able to “defend their faith” when arguing with Protestant groups or “sects.” Many Protestant groups go door-to-door and personally visit homes to announce the Good News. The Bible tends to be the main topic of discussion during their visits to Catholic homes. The reality, however, is that in many of these conversations neither the Catholics nor the Protestants have a firm understanding of the Bible. These discussions are mainly focused on interpretation of the text that are either based on their own opinion or on what they heard in sermons delivered by their pastors or priests. Their lack of knowledge of the Bible leads them to perform a “proof reading” where the Bible is used to defend their opinions or fight doctrines. Sadly, most of these discussions lack the authentic spirit of dialogue or ecumenism that can more often be found in many churches in the United States. When defending their opinions, both groups usually end up discussing or arguing about the same matters:

- Whether the pope is the “Vicar of Christ” and his title as Holy Father. Why are there priests, bishops, and cardinals if Jesus did not ordain anyone, or at least the Bible does not specify that he did?
- Why are there so many sacraments if the Bible does not record so many? Why do you have to confess your sins to a priest who is equally as sinful as you?
- Whether Mary is the mother of God. Why do you need Mary as an intercessor? Why do you need saints to intercede for you?
- Why do you have images in your churches when Exodus clearly prohibits the use of such images?

The tensions over images grow increasingly worse when “popular religiosity” enters into the conversation. People argue that the images are the devil or that the images somehow hide the devil. It is very common to find different kinds of attacks between churches on the Internet, especially on YouTube and Facebook. Some pastors who claimed to embody the biblical spirit of prophesy have destroyed images of Mary in their services to emphasize their beliefs against idols, often quoting Exodus 20:4. One thing that promotes this constant battle is the use of militaristic metaphors that evoke a “spiritual battle.” Participants on both sides incorporate the metaphors into their sermons or media to promote their views. Phrases like “to fight against Protestantism,” “defend our faith,” or “defend the Church of Christ” are being used as a sort of rally cry to energize followers and oppose other churches. These metaphors create a crusade-like mentality among the people who believe this is a battle that must be fought. Sadly, the lack of proper formation of the two groups is one reason for this situation. Neither group expresses a desire to study or try to understand the other tradition. The lack of knowledge about the other tradition often leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of practices, doctrines, and beliefs. In particular, Catholics do not know the teachings of the Church concerning her relationship with other Christian churches: “the Catholic Church embraces them as brothers [and sisters], with respect and affection.”³ This idea is reinforced in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

One cannot charge with the sin of the separation those who at present are born into these communities [that resulted from such separation] and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ, and the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affec

3 Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_de-cree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

tion as brothers [...] they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church.⁴

Now the question is: how do we go about improving the relationships between the churches in these contexts? I propose that the following points may be considered to help address the tension:

1. *The aspect of language.* It is imperative to change some of the language and rhetoric used to refer to the other Christian churches. The military language and metaphors of war must be replaced with peaceful language and metaphors that imply unity rather than a win-or-lose mentality. Furthermore, divisive language makes one view the other person as an enemy rather than a fellow brother or sister.
2. *Openness to learn.* It is fundamental for people to learn their own faith tradition and the traditions of the other Christian churches in their community. First, it is vital that people have a firm understanding of their own tradition. In most confrontations between Catholics and Protestant communities, neither group has a strong understanding of their respective traditions. The lack of knowledge about scripture and tradition is evident in many of these dialogues. Second, it is important to engage and study other traditions with respect and admiration. When learning about other traditions, we should draw upon material and sources from within that tradition. For example, we should learn about the Catholic tradition from Catholic sources, and about the Protestant traditions from Protestant sources. It would be neither fair nor wise to study a tradition solely from outside the tradition.
3. *Respectful dialogue.* Not only must we understand the other tradition, it is also important to engage it in dialogue. Ecumenism is a fundamental principle that the Catholic Church has been promoting since Vatican II. Ecumenism has also been frequently promoted in papal documents and by national bishops' conferences.⁵ We are invited not only to recognize that the other traditions exist, but to enter a respectful dialogue with them. By sharing our interpretations of the Bible, we can learn from each other and enrich our churches and society.⁶
4. *The aspect of commonality.* As we study and explore other traditions we may discover that there is more that unites us than divides us. Since we share the same sacred text, as well as similar traditions and doctrines, we should be able to find sufficient common ground to allow us to engage in meaningful dialogue.
5. *Ecumenical formation for ministers.* It is important to prepare good ministers who can help bridge the gaps between the two groups. Often, ministers who teach apologetics define it as "defense of the faith." However, I would suggest that the faith should not "be defended" but should be lived and shared with others. Ministers who promote a "defense of faith" as a kind of war or battle are not being faithful to the core message of the Gospel, which is love.

4 Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 818, <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/index.html>.

5 There are crucial and meaningful documents that can help us to reflect on the importance of ecumenism among Christians and, in a broader ways, with non-Christians. These documents include the following: Vatican II document on *The Declaration of Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae; Nostrae Eate; Unitatis Redinrgatio; Ut Unum Sint* of John Paul II; *Directorio para la aplicación de los principios y normas sobre el ecumenismo*, from the Pontifical Council Promoting Christian Unity, among many others.

6 The promotion of a *correct* interpretation of the Bible from a Catholic perspective can be found in the document: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, which was published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1993.

The major problem facing Latin America is that aggressive apologetics is on the rise in many circles and communities. The Bible and the name of God are being used in some circles to divide and cause friction among people of faith. It is quite ironic that the holy books that should unite us actually divide us in some cases. New ways for promoting dialogue and respectful listening are needed. The conflict that exists among Catholics and Protestants in many circles of Latin America is contrary to the Spirit of love and unity that Jesus taught us.