

Latin American bishops stress need to adjust pastoral work

APARECIDA, Brazil – The changes which have occurred in Latin America in recent years are so profound that they require fundamental changes in the way the church approaches pastoral work, said a cardinal from Honduras.

“We need a pastoral conversion,” Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa said. “If these are difficult times, new disciples are needed – disciples who are able to respond to the difficulty, to resist the cultural storms that we are experiencing.”

After listening to presidents from Latin American and Caribbean bishops’ conferences describe the problems the church is facing in their countries, Cardinal Rodriguez told reporters, “The question is how to respond to the new situations in Latin America.”

That will be the key issue for bishops participating in the May 13-31 Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. The second full day of the meeting May 15 featured a seven-minute presentation from each country’s bishops’ conference.

Some of the bishops provided detailed analysis of their countries’ political, economic and social situation, while others focused on their expectations for the conference.

One common theme, Cardinal Rodriguez said, was the need for better formation for Catholics as disciples of Christ who can spread the faith with reinforcement from the Scriptures.

The church needs “a new pastoral model that can respond to the longing for the word of God. We need more biblical impetus” to pastoral work, he said.

Several bishops also asked the gathering to develop a profile of the kind of priest needed today and the type of theological, sociological and technological formation seminarians should receive in order to respond to the new challenges.

The bishops expressed concern that the church's "missionary spirit" has become "a bit passive, a bit tired," said Cardinal Rodriguez. The church leaders hope that the conference will lead to "a renewal of mission" in the region, he added.

In analyzing their countries' political, economic and social problems, the bishops described problems related to a lack of decent health care, education and housing in their countries, as well as persistent unemployment.

"The degradation of family life and of education of the next generations" was a common issue, along with violence, a "culture of consumerism" and corruption, said Guillermo Escobar Herran, a Colombian political science professor who is serving as an official adviser to the bishops during the meeting.

Another recurring theme was poverty and its resulting migration from rural to urban areas within countries, to other Latin American countries, and to the United States and Europe as people seek better opportunities, he noted.

"It is not only the people who are poor and excluded who migrate," Escobar said, "but also large numbers of well-educated, middle-class people, which further impoverishes the continent."

Chicago-native Bishop Daniel Turley Murphy of Chulucanas in northern Peru told Catholic News Service that the migration of Latin Americans to countries like the United States could be part of a renewed missionary effort.

"It's a tremendous opportunity," he said. The church and the destination countries could benefit "if the migrants were to leave with the desire to bring Christ to the world, which means (bringing) peace and justice."