

A Jewish-Catholic glimpse on Latin American reality
(A Talk Given by Rabbi Skorka on June 19, 2019 to the NCS-USCCB Consultation)

The frontier between Mexico and the United States of America doesn't merely separate two different countries. It marks a continental difference within the Americas. Southward extends Latin America, a vast territory taken from their native populations, with a few negligible exceptions, by the two Iberian countries of Spain and Portugal. These countries differ from the United States and Canada not only in terms of language; other factors also contributed to the different realities that exist north and south of this borderline. The influence of the Roman Catholic Church, the presence of significant indigenous populations and substantial interbreeding all combined to produce societies to the south with different characteristics.

In the United States and Canada, the supremacy of England, the religious predominance of Anglican and Protestant Churches, and especially the democratic ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment shaped the reality of North America over a long history of contention and struggle about personal rights. The European colonists who settled in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came to stay permanently. At its best moments, the United States saw itself as a heaven for diverse peoples from all over the world who could freely exercise their rights as human beings, although this was a vision that was often sidelined by inter-ethnic competition and especially by the persistence of slavery and racism.

Although the achievement of independence of the Latin American countries, which mostly occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century, was also influenced by Enlightenment ideals and by the French revolution, the establishment of societies firmly based on democratic principles has not been fully realized even up to today. Many Europeans who emigrated to these countries came in order to make money, to "make it in America" and then return to Europe. A significant part of the Latin American population lived their lives with their minds and hearts lingering in the European countries from whence they came. Latin American countries are struggling even now to strengthen democratic regimes, laws, and jurisprudence.

Argentina was the most highly developed of the Latin American countries in the twentieth century. Cosmopolitan cities like Buenos Aires, Córdoba, etc., universities with a high level of academic study and research, and many cultural expressions marked Argentinian society. The country tried to attract European immigrants in order that their skills could help develop the economy and culture of the young nation. Among the agreements signed by Argentinean authorities was one sponsored by the German Jewish philanthropist Maurice de Hirsch to settle Jews from the Czarist Empire after massive pogroms erupted against Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was the first important and organized wave of Jewish immigration to Latin America. Brought by Hirsch, these Jews settled on fields in the interior of the country and built up colonies where they worked in agriculture and cattle raising. This was a historic turning point: after hundreds of years when Jews in Europe were deprived of owning and working the land, this was an enormous new opportunity for them. Argentina was for them a

kind of “promised land.”¹ (Incidentally, a parallel Jewish agricultural wave of migration that occurred at the same time was in Ottoman Palestine, backed by Baron Edmond James de Rothschild and many others who supported the dreams of Zionism.)

The miserable living conditions in Europe and the Middle East before and after the First World War precipitated a second and very important wave of Jewish immigration to Latin America during the first four decades of the twentieth century. At the same time many other Europeans and Middle Eastern people emigrated to Latin America. Jews, especially, organized themselves into creating institutions to maintain their culture and identity in the New World.

The harsh living conditions experienced by the new immigrants encouraged solidarity across ethnic lines. Jews, Christians and Muslims developed good relations in the different neighborhoods of the big cities, but many of the prejudices they brought with them from abroad persisted, albeit in a latent way.

Latin American regimes at the time were mostly led by a strongman leader, a “caudillo.” One of the most famous among them was the three-term Argentinean President Juan Domingo Perón. Democratic, communist, socialist and nationalistic parties fought each other to make society accord with their specific ideologies. Revolutions and *coups d'état* occurred often in Latin American countries.

Antisemitism was present in the various countries, but at a much lower level than in Europe. Nevertheless, rightwing people connected with the Catholic Church instigated antisemitic actions. During the bloody events of the “tragic week” (January 7-14, 1919) in Buenos Aires, there occurred the one pogrom against Jews in the history of the New World.² During the 1930s, when a wave of ferocious antisemitism engulfed Europe, all kinds of antisemitic outbursts happened in Latin America. At the same time that the Evian Conference met in France to address the growing tide of Jewish refugees from the Nazis (July 6-15, 1938), the Argentinean Minister of Foreign Affairs, José María Cantilo, signed a momentous order – circular 11³ – which denied the right to immigrate to Argentina of all Europeans experiencing political displacement, i.e. the Jews. This fateful document distributed among all the Argentinean embassies and consulates worldwide virtually closed off for many Jews any hope of escape from the lethal fate prepared for them by the Nazis.

After the Second World War the Jewish community in Argentina became one of the best organized and most creative communities throughout the Diaspora. Two daily newspapers in *Yiddish* appeared, in addition to other papers and journals. Indeed, Buenos Aires was a world center for the publication of books in *Yiddish*. Zionism was the cultural major epicenter of Jewish spiritual life. A network of Jewish “complementary schools” educated new generations in fluent

¹ Haim Avni, *Argentina and the Jews : A History of Jewish Immigration*, The University of Alabama Press, 2002.

² Bilsky, Edgardo J. (1984). *La Semana Trágica*. Biblioteca Política Argentina **50**. Buenos Aires

³<https://beatrizgurevich.wordpress.com/tag/1939/>

Hebrew and with a knowledge of all the Jewish cultural sources. Many youngsters made *aliyah* both before and after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. They were part of the *Kibbutzim* and *Moshavim* movements that sustained the socio-economical structure of the new state. Their vision was the creation of a new Jewish reality in which Jews could develop an independent country on the historical land of their Patriarchs, could speak their own language, and build a society based on social justice and a strong democracy. They abandoned the homes built by their parents in Latin America and went to live in the very difficult conditions of Israel.

The shadows of the *Shoah* were a very important element in the Jewish Argentinean consciousness. Jews lived as a minority in Argentina. A Jew, by law, could never become the president of the country. There has been not one Jew in Argentinean history with a high military rank. This is not the case in other Latin American countries, as in Chile, for instance. Nevertheless, many Jews were involved in Latin American politics, achieving positions in the different legislative bodies and as judges in the different Supreme Courts of Justice. In Argentina only last year a Jewish lawyer became a judge on the Supreme Court of Justice.

The declaration of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, together with the other documents issued by the Second Vatican Council had a great impact on many young Catholic priests in Latin America. The then youthful Argentinean priest Jorge Mejía*, who later became a cardinal and the Archivist of the Vatican Archives, participated in the Council and afterwards developed extraordinary initiatives in Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Different rabbis and congregational leaders involved themselves with building a new interfaith relationship, especially in Argentina, but also in other Latin-American countries.⁴ The commitment of those pioneers, who were so devoted to the recreation of Jewish-Christian relations, had such passion that they achieved unique and historical heights that had never been seen before.

During the 1970s, Argentina, Chile, and Peru, among other Latin American countries, suffered from the attacks of organized terrorist groups, Montoneros, ERP, Tupamaros, Sendero Luminoso, etc. and the military repression against them. This was a very tragic chapter in the history of the region.

Today, a great number of the inhabitants of Latin America are living in miserable conditions, the consequence of the high level of corruption and inefficiency in the different governments. Church institutions and Jewish organizations have both developed special welfare commissions to help people in desperate situations meet their basic vital needs.

⁴ Abraham Skorka, El diálogo judeo-católico a cincuenta años de “Nostra Aetate”. Una perspectiva Latinoamericana, El Olivo, Vol. 38, No. 79-80, 2014, pág. 33-44.

*He had in Rabbi Marshall Meyer a very good partner who did a great work in the recreation of spiritual values in the whole Latin Americas and especially for the interreligious dialogue.

The consumption of drugs has multiplied in recent decades, and the accompanying misery has appeared in many places that had never experienced it before. Social polarization on many levels has also intensified recently.

During the nineties took place in Argentina two terrorist attacks that destroyed the buildings of the Embassy of Israel and of the Community of Buenos Aires, the latest was the major attack on Diaspora Jews since the end of the Second World War. Factors from abroad and local connections perpetrated the attacks.

In the twentieth century, similar factors have impacted Jews and Christians alike in the region. From one side was a great secularization. Old traditions were being set aside in the modernized world, causing a loss of identity and values among both Jews and Christians. On the other side, since the century's last decades there has arisen a movement among Jews to return to orthodoxy, which has caught the hearts and minds of many young people. This was a global phenomenon, described by Gilles Kepel in his famous book *The Revenge of God* (Penn State University Press, 1993, which is the English translation of the French original *La Revanche de Dieu*, Éditions du Seuil, 1991). At the same time there was a very important growth of new Pentecostal churches in Latin America that attracted many believers from the Catholic Church.

Of course, Latin America was the cradle of the current Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio. One of the reasons for his election was undoubtedly to bring a breath of fresh air to the Catholic believers in one of the most important Catholic bastions throughout the world.

For many reasons, I began to involve myself in interreligious dialogue in the early 1970s. As I mentioned earlier, that dialogue was already a significant venture with some important achievements. I had several different Catholic companions on the road of dialogue, but Bergoglio was, by far, the one who demonstrated the most spiritual audacity and courage. His intense devotion to the dialogue, and especially to the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, is unique in history.

Bergoglio grew up and was formed in the Latin American reality and has always been sensitive to it. Argentina was a leading country in the history of the nations of the region, and Buenos Aires, its political center *par excellence*. It was there that the current Pope Francis was born and educated. Nobody raised in this city can feel uninvolved in politics. In some way, in its greatness and in its misery, the politics of Argentina, Latin America and the world were strong influences upon Buenos Aires and its inhabitants.

I used to be invited by the President of Argentina to the many solemn *Te Deum* services to honor national patriotic dates that were held in the Metropolitan Cathedral. My role was to represent the Jewish religion. The then archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio, would offer a moral assessment of Argentinean reality in front of the highest authorities of the country. That man, knowing well the evils that afflict the people of the country, used to roar loudly, imitating the biblical prophets, condemning social injustice and the suffering of the excluded. On many occasions I told him about the courage he showed by what he expressed in his homilies and that by ignorance, many would "politicize" his words and arouse the anger of others. He never changed the course of his homilies. This led President Néstor Carlos Kirchner and his presidential

successor, Dr. Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, to stop observing the custom of attending the Cathedral on national dates, including the celebration of the nation's bicentennial, going instead to houses of worship in the interior of the country. Bergoglio observed the situation with temperance and serenity.

Bergoglio had a strong commitment to the needy. On more than one occasion he accompanied the "*curas villeros*," the priest who assisted people in the slums, in visiting impoverished neighborhoods. He also strongly condemned "slave labor" and "human trafficking." He gave his support to organizations like *La Alameda*, which investigate and accuse all those who exploit others in any way.

These scourges that afflict Argentine society are endemic to all of Latin America. Therefore, we should not be surprised that as Pope Francis he visited a *favela* during his visit to Brazil. He takes it for granted that his mission in Latin America is to provide support to the millions of excluded people, who, because of social inequities, live in misery in the midst of a rich and fertile land. He understands that the Church must respond to their needs if it wishes to serve as a revitalized home for worship and culture for all those raised in the Catholic tradition.

His desire to relate to crowds that acclaim him with the most minimal security protections is a sign of his humility and simplicity. But this acquires a surpassing significance in Latin America, where an almost feudal attitude of lord and vassal is deeply rooted. Class separation is not just a matter of economic differences. There is a segregationist mentality that transforms manifestos of brotherhood into innocuous declarations and social revolutions into spasmodic eruptions that do not manage to eradicate the physical and, especially, the spiritual misery of the Latin American reality.

Ignorance and petty enmities were and remain an impediment to the physical and spiritual integration of Latin American society into one whose citizens love each other. The quest for Latin American unity continues as another outstanding issue that characterizes the region and testifies to the rivalries and prejudices that underlie the idiosyncrasies of the different peoples.

The devotion, if not idolization, given to well-known figures in politics or sport, and the blind pursuit of charismatic leaders who set themselves up as redeemers, is another facet of Latin American society that cries out for reform.

The history of Latin America is entwined with the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church in Latin America, with all its successes and errors. Pope Francis refers to the need for a new evangelization, which, as I understand it, aims to reenergize the Gospel message. This is very much needed to create the pivotal turning point to break the vicious circles of entrapment that impede the full development, in both the spiritual and material senses, of Latin Americans.

The reflections I have expressed here are not the fruit of meticulous investigations but the conclusions I've arrived at after having been born and having lived for 68 years in Latin America, and after looking around me with open eyes, trying to understand.

José Ortega y Gasset, wrote in his famous *The Revolt of the Masses*⁵:

To be surprised, to wonder, is to begin to understand. This is the sport, the luxury, special to the intellectual person. The activity characteristic of this tribe consists in looking at the world with eyes wide open in wonder. Everything in the world is strange and marvelous to fully open eyes. This faculty of wonder is the delight denied to the football “fan,” and, on the other hand, is the one that leads the intellectual person through life in the perpetual ecstasy of the visionary. His special attribute is the wonder of the eyes. Hence it was that the ancients gave Minerva her owl, the bird with ever-dazzled eyes.

⁵ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, Authorized translation from the Spanish, W.W. Norton & Company. Inc., New York, 1932, p. 12