

Vatican's Cardinal Sodano backs neoliberal economics

by Carlos Méndez

Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the secretary of state of the Vatican, told a press conference in Santo Domingo last October that Mexican President Carlos Salinas is part of "a new and important generation of politicians concerned with the progress of their people," according to the Mexican daily *La Jornada* of Oct. 29. The newspaper quoted Cardinal Sodano saying that while the situation in Ibero-America is a difficult one, there is some progress, and "there exist great countries whose economic plans are yielding results." He added that "one example of this is the very low inflation rates they have achieved in their economies."

Cardinal Sodano declared that the Mexican government's economic policy fits within the framework of the Catholic Church's definition of "solidarity," and added, "We are content with the progress in Mexico."

Cardinal Sodano's statements have special relevance because he made them within the context of the Fourth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM), held in the Dominican Republic from Oct. 12-28, and for which he served as one of its three presidents. With his statements, Cardinal Sodano was not only endorsing the neoliberal economic policies of President Salinas, but was also giving the nod to other Ibero-American Presidents, such as Argentina's Carlos Menem and Venezuela's Carlos Andrés Pérez, who are imposing similar policies of economic liberalism upon their countries.

"Neoliberalism" is the term used widely outside of the United States to denote the kind of "flea market economics" which has already wrecked large parts of eastern Europe. Sodano's sympathy for the neoliberal economic model is echoed in the final document issued by the CELAM conference, which was later submitted to Pope John Paul II for approval. That document contains the same endorsement of the bankers' economic model imposed on Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, and other Ibero-American countries, even though it also admits the urgent need for meeting the vast social costs such policies incur. As 1992 drew to a close, the CELAM document had not been approved by the pope.

Is the cardinal blind?

Can Cardinal Sodano be unaware of the fact that it is

precisely this neoliberal economic model which is foisting conditions of genocide upon the subcontinent of Ibero-America (and elsewhere) in order to extract every last ounce of national wealth to pay the foreign creditors' usurious debt?

Can Cardinal Sodano be unaware of what is happening, for example, in Mexico, where unemployment and poverty levels are soaring as a result of these same policies? Can he be unaware of what every Mexican knows: that the Salinas government has reduced inflation by reducing the living standards of the majority of Mexicans?

Can Cardinal Sodano be unaware that according to the official figures of the Salinas government itself, more than 40 million Mexicans are living in extreme poverty, and another 20 million are living below the poverty level as defined by the United Nations?

Can he be unaware that in 1990, there were 12 million Mexican children working in the informal economy, of which 18.7% were between 5 and 9 years of age?

On Nov. 30, *El Financiero* journalist Marcos Chavez wrote that "the employment picture during the four years of the Salinas government couldn't be more discouraging. On the one hand, the economy has proven incapable of generating the number of jobs required by the 800,000 individuals who annually enter the labor market for the first time. . . . And what is worrisome, is that this phenomenon will not change during the rest of the six-year term," among other reasons because of "the anti-inflationary policies applied. . . ."

"Under Salinas, employment has risen 0.7%, that is, only 600,000 jobs have been created against a demand for more than 3 million." According to *El Financiero* of Nov. 26, "The minimum wage, whose adjustments still serve as a reference point for one-third of the Mexican labor force, fell during the [government's] first four years by more than 15%. This is the social cost of reducing inflation. . . ."

"According to figures from the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information (INEGI), 36% of the economically active population (EAP) is now part of the informal economy. A similar percentage earns up to two minimum wages, or approximately \$235 . . . while some

43 million Mexicans subsist in extreme poverty.”

Nacional Financiera, a state investment institution, reported on Oct. 27 that unemployment by the end of 1992 would reach 35 million Mexicans.

Thus, the “success” Cardinal Sodano would attribute to Mexico’s anti-inflation efforts has been achieved at the cost of the impoverishment of the majority of the population. This same “success” story is being repeated across Ibero-America, as in the case of Argentina where more than 500 retirees have committed suicide in the recent period because their pensions had been reduced to below survival levels. Thanks to President Carlos Menem’s so-called “modernization” policies, the vast majority of the country’s officially registered 3.2 million pensioners today receive a monthly equivalent of \$150, while the basic monthly “market basket” for a single worker in Argentina costs \$1,000.

“If one does an analysis of the number of [retirees’] suicides in any part of the world, one will see that the figures here are normal; the suicide index is normal,” President Menem defensively argued Sept. 17. Could the Argentine pompadour be one of those Presidents described by Cardinal Sodano as part of “a new and important generation of politicians concerned with the progress of their people”?

CELAM: adjustments ‘could prove beneficial’

In its final document entitled *Conclusions*, the Fourth General CELAM conference reproaches “the neoliberal policy that predominates today in Latin America and the Caribbean,” but then goes on to state that “economic adjustments, although they can prove beneficial in the long run, by braking inflation and stabilizing the economy, usually cause a serious deterioration in the living standards of the poor” (emphasis added).

Herein lies the error of the CELAM document, since “economic adjustments” as conceived within the neoliberal model can never be “beneficial,” nor can they help solve economic instability or runaway inflation, either in the short or long term. On the contrary, by imposing bankers’ accounting techniques upon real nations, by forcing them to slash health, education, and defense budgets, to shrink agricultural and industrial credit, to eliminate infrastructure expenditures, to privatize strategic sectors of the economy, these economies are being asset-stripped, sacrificed for criminally usurious debt repayment to keep the bankers’ house of cards from collapsing.

CELAM and Eco ’92

This economic outlook, reflecting the CELAM concluding document’s fundamental weakness, is not accidentally linked to its tolerance of a malthusian-ecologist view of the world as well. The *Conclusions* document, for example, states that “the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development [Eco ’92], held in Rio de Janeiro . . . has emphasized the seriousness of the ecological crisis on a

world scale.” That CELAM chose to give credibility to that conference and its conclusions flies in the face of Biblical teachings which give man dominion over the Earth, and *not* the other way around: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.”

At the Rio de Janeiro conference, a deformed concept of ecology was offered as a pretext for blocking the development of, especially, the countries of the Third World, by condemning them to the use of backward “sustainable” technologies incapable of producing sufficient food and other goods required to guarantee a dignified existence for an ever-expanding population. It is, in fact, no accident that Eco ’92 also insisted on the need to dramatically reduce population growth.

Further, the Rio conference included as one of its activities the so-called Kari-oca conference, subtitled World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Territory, Environment and Development. The Kari-oca conference stated in its final declaration, “We maintain our right to our traditional way of life,” which means to condemn the Indian population to eventual extinction by hunger and disease. Venezuelan anthropologists have observed, for example, that the Yanomami Indians who inhabit the Venezuelan and Brazilian Amazon have an average life span of barely 30 years.

Point 17 of the Kari-oca Declaration states that “We maintain our right to our spiritual way of life,” which implicitly proposes a return to the human sacrifices of the Aztecs and to other aberrations which characterized the cultural, religious, social, and political “life-styles” of many of the ancient primitive indian cultures.

These two points of the Kari-oca Declaration also find an echo in the *Conclusions* document of the CELAM conference which, under the title “The Earth: Gift of God,” states, “In our continent one must consider two opposing views with regard to the Earth:

“a) The Earth, within the set of elements which form the indigenous community, is life, a sacred place, the ‘feminine face of God,’ the integrating center of community life. Within her they live and coexist in communion with their forefathers and in harmony with God; for this same reason, the Earth, their Earth, forms a substantial part of their religious experience and of their own historical project. Among the indigenous there exists a natural respect for the land: She is the Mother Earth which nourishes her children; that is why she must be protected and not mistreated, and her permission sought to sow.

“b) The mercantilist view considers the land from the exclusive standpoint of exploitation and profit, even to the point of dispossessing and expelling its legitimate owners.”

After 500 years of the evangelization of the New World, one is forced to ask if the Latin American Bishops Conference really wants to include such pagan concepts of Earth worship and malthusianism in their final document, which presumably represents Catholic Church doctrine.