



FATHER ROBERT PELTON AND THE CHURCH IN *AMÉRICA*

When I first met Fr. Bob Pelton, many things impressed me immediately: his enthusiasm, his wisdom, his energy, and his vibrant personality. But certainly what touched me the most was this love for Latin America and the rich heritage of this continent. But also, and perhaps mainly, his love and deep consideration for the Church of that part of the American continent. Fr. Pelton really believes in the Latin American Church and the contribution it has given and will continue to give to the Universal Church and to the world itself.

Then I discovered that this attitude came from first-hand experience. Fr. Pelton has been not only visiting but living in Latin America for extended periods of his life. He lived in Chile during the 1960s and the 70s and experienced the pain of the people of Chile under the dictatorship of Pinochet. Also he could feel very closely the courage and the prophetic spirit of a good part of the Chilean Church, who denounced tortures and murders in the prisons and in the “death flights” (vuelos de la muerte, when political prisoners were thrown to death in the sea). Many of the members of that Church – priests, religious, sisters and lay people –suffered in their own flesh.

Fr. Pelton also made his presence known in Central America. As a freelance journalist he covered the visits of Pope John Paul II and regional conferences of Catholic bishops at that part of the continent. Undoubtedly during those visits, he learned to admire gigantic figures of the Latin American Church, among whom blessed Óscar Romero, the Jesuit community of El Salvador, and many others. One of the concrete fruits of this labor was the creation of the Romero Day in Notre Dame, initiative that continues even today.

Also Fr. Pelton always transmitted to me a great affection for Latin American theology, including the famous Liberation Theology. He read its main authors and always showed a deep knowledge and affinity with the proponents of this theological line, who advocated after the Second Vatican Council for the preference for the poor. He knew the Basic Ecclesial Communities and always appreciated this way of being Church which emerged from the grassroots.

Last year, when I was in Notre Dame for a sabbatical period at Kellogg Institute, I had the opportunity to witness at close range his interest on Cuba and the process going on there, with the easing of the tensions between the Island and the US. He enthusiastically organized a trip with undergraduate students and scholars from US and many Latin American countries to Havana where a conference took place regarding Pope Francis' visits to the North and South of *América*.

The conference was coordinated by Prof. Dr. Peter Casarella and myself - and was a success. The students were very interested in visiting Havana and the impact on them was real and strong. The scholars were in high spirits after the presentation and sharing of the reflections on Pope Francis's magisterium to American continent, north and south.

Unfortunately Fr. Pelton couldn't go due to health problems at the last moment. But his presence, his spirit, was more than alive in those days, and was felt by each one of us. For all that, we thank him at this moment when Notre Dame celebrates his life and work. It is a privilege to have someone like him leading projects which are now bearing fruit and fertilizing other projects. Thank you, Fr. Pelton and we hope you continue to inspire and lift us up with your enthusiasm and apostolic force.

Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer