New Dilemmas for Religious and NGOs in Latin America

We are living interesting but harsh times and long standing paradigmas are falling and changing fast. The third millennium hits us with events that were unexpected not more than half a century ago. Fundamentalisms, political or religious, try to impose - through ideologies or violence - their convictions without considering the cost in pain, anguish or human lives. Nothing and no one is safe. The globalization is a contradictory and complex phenomenon that impacts on universal values and enlarges - instead of closing - the gap between people, societies and countries. Cultural habits, traditions and religious beliefs cannot keep the track and the impact on social and individual behaviors is great with dramatic consequences on almost all spheres of life.

Five centuries after the Portuguese and Spanish Kingdoms conquered Latin America imposing Catholicism and forbidding the existing native religions, the Cuban writer Reinaldo González explains: “Catholicism, a mestizo faith itself, overlapped its rituals on the existing ones, erected temples on the old ceremonial sites, became cruel towards those that had different and antique beliefs but, at the same time gave birth to surprising number of diversities. Leniency allowed for the mixed faith of our populations, original cults and African rites interweave with the Catholic although it was required that officiating priests and participants in those rites had to be baptized in Roman´s faith. The multiplicity of the Catholic iconography – although it is said that all feminine representations correspond to a single virgin and, that the enormous number of local saints follows ecclesiastic rules, contribute to the confusion”

This phenomenon was felt mainly in the northern and central area of Latin America, where native cultures were stronger, local populations mixed less with the conquerors and in the Caribbean and Brazil where black African slavery was not abolished till the end of the nineteenth century. Native and African cults
and rites evolved mixing with catholic iconography and creating different cults and traditions that still are present nowadays in local populations and cultures. In this process, two thirds of most primitive languages were practically lost to Spanish and Portuguese and with those languages, the cultural way for native populations to perceive and understand the world. As Koichiro Matsuura, General Director of UNESCO states: the disappearance of a language conducts also to the disappearance of a great part of the cultural patrimony and the invaluable legacy of the traditions and oral expressions of a community. This way, Catholicism became and still is today, the dominant religion for almost 90% of the 570 million inhabitants of the region.

During the following centuries Latin America, an immensely rich region, became the searched for refuge for destitute and poor people that emigrated in huge masses from a hunger driven and intolerant Europe, bringing with them their cultures and beliefs. With the time, greater religious tolerance and democracy became possible in the continent, even though the effects of Inquisition, that reigned strongly in the region during two centuries, was only abolished in Perú and Mexico during the XIX° century and its consequences are still being felt in many Latin American countries.

Public policies are often mixed with politics in the region, democratic regimes although extended are not very stable while authoritarian governments and the struggle for power is the general rule. Only recently most countries changed their legislations that sustained Catholicism as the official religion, the requirement of being catholic to hold the higher levels of government and compulsory religion classes to all students in local public schools. Even so, with active human rights movements, local conservative groups still hold great power in political and institutional structures, and the catholic church voice and opinion is almost decisive when it comes to matters related to education, health and civil society. Pluralism has grown in most countries but religion is still being considered a central feature of life. It is interesting to note that women, more likely than men, are strong believers and faith plays a very important role in
their lives even tough their quotidian reality is more affected by the influence of religions.

Although one of the richest regions in natural resources, Latin America is the less equitable in the whole world and inequalities are to be found everywhere. Some countries made advances during the last decade but the region as a whole will probably not be able to achieve the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in several objectives and mainly in the fight against poverty. Due to inefficient and/or authoritarian governments and insufficient economic growth suffered during long periods, most countries have been incapable of developing better distribution of the national income and access to better services of nutrition, health and education. Forty percent, over two hundred million of persons are poor and almost half of them are living in indigence and social welfare. Even though schooling is mandatory in the first level and almost 90% of children attend schools till the age of 11/12 years, one of each three youngsters aged 13 to 19 never get to start or abandon soon their secondary schools. Most of these youngsters are coming from already poor families, do not work nor study. The children of poor fathers and mothers have a great probability of being poor themselves repeating their parents story. This leads to a kind of intergenerational and cultural production of structural poverty, very complicated to change. Just in 2006, 80,000 youth died violently, nearly one third of these just between 10 to 19 years old in the region. Poverty, social inequities and lack of opportunities are the required ingredients in the melting pot in which women and children harassment, insecurity and discrimination are being brewed. In this scenery, religious actors and non governmental secular organizations are involved addressing local situations with their limited resources but in 2008 the world was shocked by the worst financial crisis since 1930 and the adverse reality faced already by many people worsened to extreme limits producing more marginalized populations

In 2008, and according to epidemiological information of UNAIDS, the United Nations Agency especially created to deal with HIV/AIDS, there were over 33,4
million people living with HIV and, of those 15.7 million are women and 2.1 million less than 15 years old children. Since the first cases were reported about 25 years ago, more than 20 million persons died. Just in Latin America, over 2 million people are living with HIV and 90.000 died during last year. Every day, the epidemic affects specially women, youngsters and children in low resources settings. The epidemic although still focused on men that have sex with men (MSM) is rapidly turning heterosexual. Because the disease is so closely linked to sexual activity, drug use and gender inequality, the spread of AIDS is disproportionately high among groups that experience discrimination and have always been marginalized socially, culturally and often economically such as sex workers, MSM and migrants. The impact is so big in human lives and productive economic development that AIDS is the only health issue ever that became the subject of a Special Session of the UN General Assembly and a subject that is treated on a regular basis in most international high level meetings.

Women aged 15 to 49 years represent more than half of the total number of adult HIV cases. Women are more vulnerable to infection than men not only physiologically but also socially and have a much greater economic vulnerability. Their risk increases because of diverse factors like traditional macho cultures, sexual exploitation and violence, less access to education and economic dependence. But it is not only AIDS that affects disproportionately women, according to a study about “Health and Women”, presented in Geneva by the World Health Organization (WHO) the most frequent death cause for women between 15 and 49 years are AIDS, TBC and problems related to pregnancy. The report also mentions that 99% of the half million of women dying with problems related to pregnancy every year, take place in the developing world, a “foreseeable tragedy”. A national survey done in 2005 in Argentina concluded that the worse health problems faced by women are youth pregnancies, sexual abuse and abortions. During the Vº Latin American Forum on HIV/AIDS and STDs, that took place in Lima, Perú in November 2009, Dr. Ruben Mayorga UNAIDS Coordinator for Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and
Chile, reported that every year more than 6000 children are still born with HIV in the region, even though vertical transmission is already almost inexistent the developed world. Other severe sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) include 450,000 cases of gestational syphilis and between 50 to 80% of these pregnancies end in abortions, fetal death or diverse congenital infections.

The report “Abortion Worldwide: A Decade of Uneven Progress” published by the Guttmacher Institute in 2009, states that about 3.8 million abortions are performed every year in Latin America, most in unsafe conditions. Of those, about 7,600 women die and many more develop secondary infertility as a consequence of badly performed practices. Human Rights Watch presented recently a report in Argentina as part of a wide national campaign for the despenalization of voluntary interruptions of pregnancies stating that abortions are the main cause of maternal death in Argentina. According to available data and in spite of penalization about 500 thousand clandestine abortions are performed every year in miserable and high risk conditions. Around 80 women are hospitalized every day to be treated for bad performed abortions and every 13 days a woman dies for this cause.

Even tough this is official information released by the Argentinean health authorities, the church continues opposing categorically abortion and considers it a crime even in case of violations. For Catholicism life starts at conception and interfering with pregnancy is interrupting a life, birth control and sexual reproductive rights are presented as illegitimate, amoral and illegal and may have ominous consequences for the health and life of women. The report by HRW provides details of the restrictions and insurmountable obstacles that women face when trying to use contraceptive devices. These barriers include domestic and sexual violence by their family and partners, the reluctance of providing information and services by many public health care providers and many women simply can not afford to pay for the contraceptive methods.
The Catholic Church is clearly the biggest and most respected voice in matters concerning day to day life in the region. For certain population belief is culturally much stronger than scientific education and a major part of Latin America’s habitants visit regularly churches or temples, although presenting themselves as non religious and secular. While surveys show that other groups like politicians, media and private businessmen are held in low opinion, it is widely accepted that the most respected actors in the region are the faith and the non governmental organizations. The values that the civil society shares with the religious actors are equity, social justice, access to equal opportunities and solidarity with the common challenge to create and sustain reasonable living conditions in an economic context structured on inequalities. The problems arise when conservative beliefs start clashing with the best scientifically proved public health practices. The diverse approach to sexual education, gender identity, contraception, safe abortions and sexual diseases prevention became a human rights issue when the gap between theology and science became an ethic issue.

In view of the traditional views still held in the region, an increasing quantity of local and international civil society non governmental organizations and activists, have taken on them the representation of stigmatized groups challenging religious organizations and local churches. Tensions between humanism and religion are fueled by the social reality in countries where poverty and inequalities are traditionally suffered by a vast part of their populations. Responses related to violence, drugs use, women and children harassment, require the involvement of community based organizations when public policies are absent or inefficiently implemented. Civil society has the big task of advocating and lobbying for these policies and the implementation of sustainable programs from a perspective of human rights focused on the reduction of poverty, more education, and a solution to unwanted pregnancies and gender violence including STDs and HIV prevention. AIDS is an exceptional disease because besides the HIV virus, everything else in the epidemic is preexistent: diverse sexual orientations, stigma, drugs, sexual work, poverty,
criminalizing consented homosexual conducts, transfobia, and other violations to elemental human rights.

Strict public health issues like condoms promotion to avoid STDs and HIV infections, and safe and legal abortions in a region where millions of interventions are performed anyway, with deaths or severe health consequences in many cases are also a dividing gap between NGOs and faith groups. All documents presented by WHO and UNAIDS clearly state that prevention is the mainstay of the response to AIDS and condoms are an essential part of all comprehensive prevention and care programs. Given that more than 33 million people worldwide are living with HIV, the church opposition to the use of condoms attracts much criticism and recent time Popes barring their prey from using any kind of artificial contraceptives are blamed even from within the own religious circles. In his first homily the actual Pope Benedict XVI stated that he would continue to underline “the inviolability of human beings, the inviolability of human life from conception to natural death” adding that abstinence and fidelity are the only “fail-safe” way to prevent the spread of HIV. Even so, Mexican Cardinal Lozano Barragan, informed that the Pope had asked the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care and other theologians to study condom use in certain circumstances and specifically if a spouse has the right to use a condom or oblige their marriage partner to do so in self defense against HIV infection. (Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report 4/24/06).

More open minded and impacted by South Africa´s tragedy, the former Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu said, “we would have hoped for someone more open to the recent developments in the world, the ministry of women and a more reasonable position with regards to condoms and HIV/AIDS”.( BBC News Online. Africans hail conservative Pope. 20 April 2005)

In an article titled “The new and medical ethics” published by the British Medical Journal in 2005, the journalist D.M. Scalise mentions that the defense of life is essential and enshrined in the most controversial encyclicals as Humanae Vitae of Paul VI (1986) and Evangelium Vitae of John Paul II (1995).
The Catholic Church is traditionally against abortion seen as a contravention of moral law with the status of the unborn child starting at conception. The question is whether the Vatican might allow and accept the condom's ability to defend life, albeit only within marriage, to take priority over its ability to prevent conception? The church knows that in the real world, its commandments concerning sexuality are not being kept by most of the more than one billion Catholics around the world and not even by many priests.

It is interesting to note that even in scientific circles there is a common acceptance that abstinence and fidelity should be encouraged as part of any healthy strategy. The problem arises with abstinence only proposals, even more when it is a proved fact that, in some societies, marriage can be a serious risk factor for women. Meanwhile in the developing world people continue having non protected sexual relations and unwanted pregnancies are followed either by unwanted newborns or by clandestine abortions victimizing the poor mothers that cannot afford to pay for decent medical assistance.

In view of the extension and growth of AIDS, diverse Christian religious groups that even includes catholic organizations, formed in 2007 a Interreligious Latin American and Caribbean Network on HIV/AIDS with the purpose of confronting with the problems that the epidemic poses in the region. More than 7,000 religious leaders of 13 countries were trained in programs and projects in each of these countries. Their programs are focused particularly on assisting the persons living with HIV from a perspective of Christian love and human rights trying to stop stigma and discrimination. Controversial aspects concerning prevention methods other than abstinence, pregnancy interruptions and the acceptance of sexual diversities are avoided in public declarations but reluctantly accepted in the ground level of involved communities. Faith based organizations have been an integral part of the AIDS movement almost since the beginning of the epidemic in palliative care and assistance to persons living with AIDS, orphans and migrant populations. They have a big role in the struggle against the epidemic, although powerful conservative religious groups
ideas still constitute a hindrance that costs thousands of lives every year in Latin America. Even more nowadays when new realities are evident and the discussion is moving to other controversial issues related to gender rights, sexual identities and new types of families.

According to a report published in 2008 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), only 39% of all Argentinean households are traditional families composed by a heterosexual couple plus their children, and this figure includes the couples that are living with children of previous relations. Almost 50% of all boys and girls in the country are born out of the bonds of marriage and specially those living in poverty. All faith based organizations, not only the catholic, are not comfortable with homosexuality, diverse sexual identities, gay marriages, adoptions by homosexual couples and monoparental families. Since primitive times no human function is more influenced or determined by beliefs or prejudices than sex. Although laws and policies are changing with a more sensitive approach to individual rights, these new models of families are conflictive everywhere, not only in Latin American societies and their widely extended conservative cultures, and it will take a long time until the required changes and acceptance is achieved.

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