

Pastor Keith E. Wiens
Text: None

January 31, 2010
Epiphany 4

THE CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA

During this season of Epiphany we are exploring the world wide mission of Christ. We have looked at the church in Africa, the church in Asia, and today we want to take a look at the church in Latin America.

The season of Epiphany teaches us that Jesus came to save all people. The last two Sundays the Bible readings from First Corinthians talked about the Body of Christ. These Bible readings teach us that all Christians are part of the Body of Christ and that all Christians have gifts from the Holy Spirit. Just as we have something to offer Christians in other parts of the world, so they have gifts to offer us.

Victoria Cortez Rodriguez is Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Nicaragua and Vice President of the Lutheran World Federation. In an essay titled, "A Church of Faith and Hope" she talks about the importance of holistic ministry for the church in Latin America. Holistic ministry is ministry to the whole person, the whole community, the whole society. Holistic ministry is important in Latin America because the church does a lot of work among the poor and oppressed. There is a lot of pain among the people and the church tries to minister to their needs.

Christians in Latin America teach us the importance of holistic ministry.

Let me back up for a moment and explain why holistic ministry can be helpful to us. Here in the western world, we tend to picture the world in terms of two vast, unrelated realms of human life. Sometimes we call them the "sacred" and the "secular." Sometimes we refer to them as "spiritual" and "material." Actually this is a very old idea - going back to the heyday of Greek philosophy, more than 2,000 years ago. It is called dualism.

When we imagine that faith is for Sunday while other values apply through the rest of the week, we fall into dualism. We have divided our lives to "sacred" and "secular" and think faith is only for the "sacred" part.

Or when we think that the gospel is just for our souls, but has little to do with our careers or our finances or politics, we fall into dualism. Again, we have divided life into two unconnected compartments.

The remedy for Greek dualism is holistic ministry - as the Christians in Latin America have learned. Holistic ministry starts with God - the God who created our bodies as well as our souls, the God who created the material world as well as the spiritual world, the God who cares so much about this world and the people in it that God took on human flesh and blood in Jesus.

Christianity is no doubt the most holistic of all religions. Most religions "begin at the top" - in some kind of dualistic, spiritualized way. Christianity, however, "begins at the bottom." It begins in a smelly stable with an infant nursing at the mother's breast. The central focus of Christianity is that God comes into life, into life on this planet, into the needs and troubles and suffering of people and is willing even to die for the sake of people like you and me.

The ministry of Jesus was a holistic ministry. He fed the hungry and healed the sick. He blessed little children and cast out demons. He challenged political leaders and hung out with social outcasts.

That's what holistic ministry tries to do. Holistic ministry cares about the whole person and the whole society. Such a ministry feeds the hungry and heals the sick. It works on behalf of children and seeks to

free people from oppression. It engages in political action and welcomes those whom society rejects. It helps people on Sunday and it helps people the rest of the week. It is a message of grace and empowerment for every conceivable part of people's lives: personal life, political life, economic life, life with family, life in the community, life in society. It is a mission to the whole person, the whole community, the whole world.

How are we doing when it comes to holistic ministry? Do we tend to think that our Christian ministry is to help people spiritually and that we shouldn't get involved with business or economics or politics or health care? I think we have a ways to go to have the same kind of holistic ministry that Jesus had. We can learn from our sisters and brothers who live south of our border who teach us that God is concerned about all of life and that God comes to share in all of life through Jesus Christ.

Still today, God comes into life, into our lives, into your life and my life. Through Christ God comes in the bread which we break and the cup from which we drink. God comes to meet us in our needs, our troubles, our illnesses, our sufferings. God comes to feed us and nourish us, to heal us and empower us. God comes to form us into the Body of Christ and send us out to do Christ's mission in the world.

May Christ's holistic ministry to us lead us to reach out to others and seek to help them in all their needs.

