

Protestants & Catholics In Latin America Never the Twain Shall Meet?

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Arequipa, Peru--It began as a Sunday afternoon celebration of faith and joy, but ended as a testimony to the divisions within the Latin American church.

Over 1,000 members of the Evangelical Church of Peru had gathered at the Plaza de Armas in the center of this beautiful Andean city. They were marking the 100th anniversary of their denomination which one missionary described as a mix of Presbyterian government and Baptist theology.

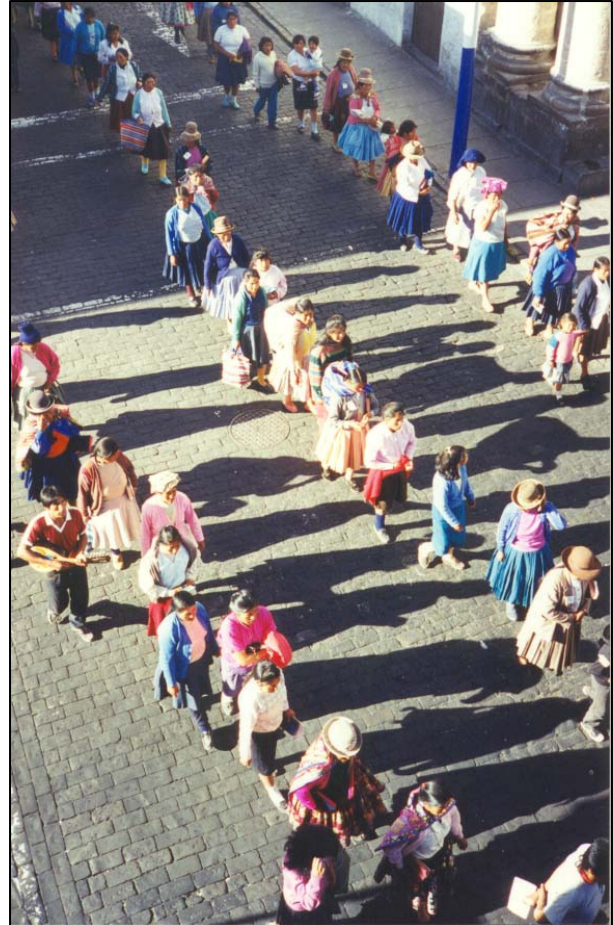
Their entrance into the town square had been nothing less than spectacular. It is an indigenous church, thus, the marchers were wearing traditional dresses, almost glowing with orange, blue, green, red, colorfully woven into designs typical of the Indian populations of Latin America. Broad brimmed hats, flowing scarfs, and gaily designed banners drew the attention of everyone in the Plaza.

Accompanied by bands and recorded music, the marchers shouted "Vive, Jesus" and other slogans, passed out tracts, and talked with those who gazed on with idle curiosity.

Gathering in front of a music stand on the west side of the square, the participants, who were wrapping up a week-long denominational meeting, sang traditional western choruses in Spanish accompanied by amplified guitars and drums, and Christian hymns set to the unique beat of Quechua music. Fiery preachers proclaimed the Gospel for all to hear.

As the last hymn was being sung, and various mothers began looking for their children who had strayed away, another ceremony began on the east side of the square.

Quietly, a large wooden arch had been erected in the street, and now two processions moved into the square from the two corners. These were faithful Roman Catholics bearing the statues of their patron saints, carried by members of the local police force. The slow procession was accompanied by the drum beat of the municipal band.



But concentration was diverted. The loud, rhythmic music of the Evangelical (Protestant) assembly was drawing attention, overpowering the Catholic event. Several members of the band looked curiously across the square. The priests kept their eyes straight ahead.

The two Catholic processions came together under the arch. Across the way, the Evangelical gathering had broken up, and most of its participants were leaving. A few stopped to watch the newcomers, but soon drifted away.

It was a celebration of the cooperation and friendship between two Roman Catholic parishes located just eight blocks apart, an annual event. Someone with a guitar struck up a hymn, the priest blessed the huge statues with incense. The two statues were tipped toward each other, touching almost as if in an embrace. A round of applause went up from this largely mestizo-Spanish gathering.



Slowly the procession turned and began its way toward one of the churches where a mass was to be held.

Soon the square cleared, and the sun began to set. Shoeshine boys and vendors passed among those who were left, plying their trade. Couples and families sat on the benches enjoying the clear, cool evening air.

It was a paradigm of the Christian church in Latin America. The indigenous, lower income population in the Evangelical church, the wealthier, Spanish-blood population in the other. Separated by race, wealth, history and practice, neither come together for cooperation, service or worship. Each goes about its business, occasionally glancing across the square out of curiosity or fear, never out of love or their oneness in Jesus Christ.

And the majority of the population returns to its daily routine, carrying on its activities without much more than a passing glance at the church.

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