A Shifting Landscape:
Latin America

The successors of St. Peter have always been our fathers, but war had left us orphans, as a lamb calling in vain for its lost mother. Now the tender mother has sought him and returned him to the fold, and we are given shepherds worthy of the church and of the Republic.

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR

A PANOPLY OF NEW NATIONS

The political upheavals that had taken place in Europe and in the British colonies of North America were also felt in Latin America early in the nineteenth century. In the Spanish and Portuguese colonies there had long been a tension between those recently arrived from Europe—the peninsulares—and the native descendants of earlier immigrants—the criollos. Through the exploitation of Indian and slave labor, the criollos had become a relatively wealthy class who felt it understood the affairs of the colonies better than the peninsulares, and that they therefore ought to have a hand in running them. But appointments to all significant offices—both civil and ecclesiastic—were made in Europe, and therefore such positions were usually held by peninsulares, many of whom had never seen the lands of the New World before they were appointed to rule them. The criollos—conveniently setting aside the toil of Indians and black slaves—were convinced that the wealth of the colonies was due to their efforts, and thus resented the authority of the peninsulares. Although still faithful subjects of the crown, they deplored the many laws that favored the metropolis at the expense of the colonies. Since many of them had the necessary means, they often traveled to Europe, from
whence they returned imbued with the republican ideas that were sweeping that continent. Thus, the criollos played a role in Latin America similar to that of the bourgeoisie in France.

In 1808, Napoleon deposed King Ferdinand VII of Spain, and in his place crowned his own brother Joseph Bonaparte—whom the Spanish dubbed Pepe Botella, or Joe Bottle. Spanish resistance to the usurper had its headquarters at Cadiz, where a “junta” or board ruled in the name of the deposed king. Napoleon declared that all Spanish colonies should now obey King Joseph; but he did not have the power to enforce his authority, and local juntas were organized in the New World. While the peninsulares insisted that all such juntas should be under the Cadiz government, the criollos preferred independent juntas, and their opinion prevailed. Thus, the colonies began ruling themselves, although still in the name of the king. Ferdinand VII was restored in 1814, after Napoleon’s defeat. But, instead of showing gratitude for those who had preserved his territories for him, he set out to undo all that the relatively liberal juntas had done. In Spain, he abolished the constitution that the Cadiz junta had issued, and the reaction was such that in 1820 he was forced to reinstate the constitution. Similar policies in the colonies exacerbated criollo resentment against Spanish policies, and soon those who had earlier proven faithful guardians of the king’s inheritance rebelled against him. In the region often referred to as the Río de la Plata—what is today Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay—the junta simply continued governing the country, until independence was proclaimed in 1816. Three years later, Paraguay declared its independence from both Spain and the Río de la Plata. Uruguay broke away in 1828, becoming an independent nation. Meanwhile, José de San Martin had crossed the Andes and invaded Chile, whose independence was declared in 1818. While these events were taking place in the south, farther north Simón Bolívar organized an army that defeated the Spanish and proclaimed the independence of Greater Colombia—now Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama. Then Ecuador joined Greater Colombia, and Bolívar marched to the south, where Peru—which then included the territory that is now Peru and Bolivia—was also made independent.

Bolívar’s dream had been to create a vast republic embracing most of the continent. But such dreams were soon shattered. Greater Colombia broke up into Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. In Peru, the region of Alto Perú—high Peru—insisted on its independence, becoming the Republic of Bolívar—now Bolivia. Bolívar’s last hopes for a continental confederacy came to naught at the Panama Congress of 1826, where it became clear that regional interests—as well as those of the United States—precluded any close collaboration between the new nations. Five years later, a few days before his death, Bolívar expressed his disappointment: “America is ungovernable. Those who have served the revolution have plowed the sea.”

In Mexico, events followed a different course. The criollos were planning to grab power from the peninsulares when the conspiracy was discovered, and one of its leaders, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, decided to make a move before being arrested. On September 16, 1810, he proclaimed Mexican independence, and soon found himself at the head of an unorganized army of sixty thousand Indians and mestizos—persons of mixed Indian and Spanish blood. After his capture and execution, Hidalgo was succeeded by mestizo priest José María Morelos. Thus, from its very beginnings the new nation had the support and participation of Indians and mestizos. For a time, the criollos regained power; but later, under the leadership of Benito
Juárez, that situation was corrected. Therefore, the Indian and mestizo populations have played important roles in the political history of Mexico. Central America, originally part of Mexico, proclaimed its independence in 1821, and later broke up into Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. (Panama was not originally part of Central America. It belonged to Colombia until 1903, when the United States fostered its independence in order to evade the conditions that Colombia required for the construction of the Panama Canal.)

Brazilian independence also resulted from the Napoleonic Wars. In 1807, fleeing from Napoleon's armies, the Portuguese court took refuge in Brazil. In 1816, João VI was restored to his throne in Lisbon but showed no inclination to return to Portugal until forced to do so by political circumstances in 1821. He left his son Pedro as regent of Brazil. Pedro later refused to return to Portugal, proclaimed Brazilian independence, and was crowned as Emperor Pedro I of Brazil. In 1825, Portugal recognized the independence of its former colony. Pedro I, however, was not allowed to rule as he wished, and was forced to agree to a parliamentary system of government. In 1889, after the abdication of Pedro's son Pedro II, the republic was proclaimed.

Haiti's independence was the direct result of the French Revolution. As soon as the French Revolution deprived the white population of military support, the blacks, who were the vast majority, rebelled. Independence was proclaimed in 1804, and it was acknowledged by France in 1825. The United States refused to do so until 1862, because until that time slave-holding states feared the example of a nation born out of a slave rebellion.

Looking at all these events as a whole, several common threads appear. Republican ideas from France and the United States provided the ideological framework for revolution and independence in Latin America. But those revolutions usually resulted in power residing in a criollo class—or, in the case of Haiti, in military leaders—that paid little attention to the needs of the masses. Vast tracts of land remained in the hands of just a few landowners, while the majority of the population had no land. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, there was great economic development on the basis of foreign capital and the exporting of agricultural products. This in turn fostered even larger holdings of land, and created an alliance between criollo landowners and foreign capital. In the cities, there also appeared an urban middle class made up of merchants and government employees who had little power, but whose interests were closely tied to the sort of economic development that was taking place. What was hoped and repeatedly promised was that the development of trade, industry, and education would eventually benefit all social classes, for even the poorest would receive a share of the wealth that was being created. But economic progress required order, and thus dictatorships were often justified.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the great ideological debate in Latin America was between liberals and conservatives. In general, the leaders of both groups belonged to the higher classes. But, while conservative strength was based on the landed aristocracy, liberals found their support among the merchants and intellectuals in the cities. Conservatives feared such notions as freedom of thought and free enterprise. Liberals defended them, both because they were more modern and because they were better suited to the interests of the merchant class. While most conservatives looked to Spain for inspiration, liberals looked to Great Britain, France, and the United States. But neither group was willing to alter the social order so that the lower classes could share in the wealth of the country. The result was a long series of dictatorships (both liberal and conservative), of palace revolutions, and of violent excesses. By the turn of the century, many tended to agree with Bolivar: the continent was ungovernable. This view seemed to be warranted by the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and resulted in a long period of violence and civil disorder that impoverished the country and led many to emigrate.

THE CHURCH IN THE NEW NATIONS
Throughout the colonial period, the church in Latin America had been under Royal Patronage—Patronato Real. This included the virtual naming of bishops by the governments of Spain and Portugal. Therefore, the tensions between peninsulares and criollos were also felt in the church, whose higher offices were in the hands of peninsulares, while criollos and mestizos formed the bulk of the lower clergy. Although a few bishops supported the cause of Spanish American Independence, most supported the crown, many by means of pastoral letters in which they condemned the rebellion. After independence, most of them had to return to Spain, thus leaving many dioceses vacant. It was impossible to name replacements, for Spain insisted on its ancient rights of Royal Patronage while the new republics could not accept bishops who were named by the crown, and even insisted on what they called a Patronato Nacional, claiming that, as heirs to the rights of the
Spanish crown, the new governments now had the right to nominate their own bishops. The popes wavered in their attitude, for Spain was still one of their main allies in Europe, but the new nations comprised a substantial part of the Catholic flock. Pius VII, in his encyclical *Etsi longissimo* (1816), spoke of the "grave evils of rebellion," and of "our most beloved son in Jesus Christ, Ferdinand, your Catholic king." Eventually, however, political reality forced him to take a neutral stance. In 1824, Leo XI, in the encyclical *Etsi iam diu*, spoke of the movement for independence as "tares," and of Ferdinand as "our very beloved son Ferdinand, Catholic king of the Spains." In Europe, France, Austria, and Russia joined Spain in opposing the acknowledgment of the new nations that would be implied in naming bishops for them without consulting with Spain. Finally, in 1827, Leo XII decided to name the first bishops for Colombia—which at the time included what are now Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. This was the occasion for Bolívar's words quoted at the beginning of this chapter. But this did not put an end to the matter, for Ferdinand broke off relations with Rome, and the pope had to undo much of what he had done. It was only in the next decade that Gregory XVI officially acknowledged the existence of the new republics, and named bishops for them. Given the sacramental nature of Catholicism, the lack of bishops meant much more than the mere lack of leaders. Without bishops there could be no ordinations; and without sufficient ordained clergy, much of the sacramental life of the church was interrupted.

The attitude of the lower clergy, mostly *criollos* and *mestizos*, contrasted with that of the bishops. In Mexico, three out of four priests supported the rebellion. Sixteen out of the twenty-nine signatories of the Declaration of Independence in Argentina were priests. Also, at the beginning of the rebellion there was little popular support for independence, and parish priests did much to gain that support. This ambivalent attitude of the church was in many ways the continuation of the two faces that the church in Latin America had shown from the earliest colonial period. While there were those—particularly in the higher echelons of the hierarchy—who supported generally conservative policies, there were also many who supported political, economic, and social change.

To complicate matters, it became increasingly evident that, regardless of what the church taught officially, the people actually understood and practiced their faith in a wide variety of ways. The lack of priests led to less emphasis on the sacraments and more on religious observances and celebrations that did not require the presence of a priest, such as saints' days, the rosary, promises to the saints, written prayers with supposedly magical powers, and so on. And all of this was combined with the survival of many elements of the ancient religions of the original populations of the Americas and of the slaves brought from Africa—and later with an esoteric spiritism brought from Europe, which emphasized reincarnation and communication with the
spirits of the dead. While most of this was often understood in purely religious terms, there is no doubt that much of it was an act of resistance against the powerful who held sway over the church.

For these reasons, the attitude of the new political leadership toward Catholicism was complex. All called themselves Catholic, and the various early constitutions affirmed that Roman Catholicism was the national religion. But tensions with Rome were such that some—particularly in Mexico—proposed breaking with Rome and creating national churches. Such projects reappeared again and again in later years, whenever the popes seemed inclined to oppose the political interests of a nation.

After independence, the conflict between liberals and conservatives was also reflected in their divergent religious policies. While conservatives wished to continue the ancient privileges of the clergy and the church, liberals opposed many of them. It was then that many native clergymen who had earlier supported independence joined the conservative ranks. The early liberals did not oppose Catholicism as such, but only what they took to be the narrow ideas and practices of a clergy that, while native born, still viewed Spain as the center of the universe. But the constant conflicts between liberals and the leadership of the church led to increased anti-Catholic feelings within the liberal ranks.

In the second half of the century, liberalism espoused the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte and therefore became more anti-Catholic. Comte was a French philosopher, and one of the founders of modern sociology who was convinced that society could and should be reorganized following the dictates of reason. According to him, humanity has gone through three stages of development: the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific or positive—for which reason his views were called positivism. Although there are still enclaves of the earlier two stages, Comte argued, we are now in the scientific age, and therefore society must be radically reorganized on the basis of scientific or positive principles. The resulting society will make a clear distinction between spiritual authority and temporal power. The latter must be placed in the hands of the capitalists and merchants, who best understand the needs of society. As to spiritual authority, this could well be placed on a new Catholic Church without a supernatural God, and devoted to the religion of humanity. Such ideas gained wide acceptance among the bourgeoisie in Latin America, especially in Brazil, but also in countries such as Argentina and Chile, where ideas from France had often been well received. The result was renewed conflict between liberals and the church, while states became increasingly secular.

In Mexico, these nineteenth-century trends culminated in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. After wars with Texas (1835–1836) and the United States (1846–1848), the liberal government headed by Benito Juárez put an end to many of the traditional privileges of the Church—eliminating the privileges of the clergy, who until then had been exempt from the jurisdiction of civil courts; ordering the church to divest itself of all property not directly related to its religious functions; and placing official records of births, marriages, and deaths in secular hands. All of this was then imbedded on the liberal Constitution of 1857. When the conservatives appealed for help to Napoleon III, the French invaded the country and set up Maximilian of Austria as its ruler (1864). This led to rebellion, and the capture and execution of Maximilian in 1867. After more civil unrest, and constant conflicts between liberals and democrats, Porfirio Díaz came to power. The Porfiriato, as his rule came to be known, was marked by thirty-four years of violent suppression of opposition, and of a rapprochement between the church and the govern-
ment, which relaxed the provisions of the Constitution of 1857. By 1910, the repressive measures of the government, and the constant impoverishment of the rural population, led to revolution. Díaz was deposed in 1911, and the privileges of the church were once again abrogated. But the conflict continued unabated for years, with ever harsher anticlerical laws on the one hand, and more open political resistance by the leaders of the church on the other. By 1926 the supporters of the church led the Cristero revolution, in which more than thirty thousand rebels and almost twice as many federal troops died. When it became clear that neither party was able to suppress the other, a compromise was reached in 1929.

All over Latin America, the second half of the nineteenth century also brought new waves of immigrants—mostly European throughout the continent, but also Chinese to the Pacific coast. Such immigration was necessary for the sort of development that the ruling bourgeoisie envisioned for Latin America. Immigrants provided the labor necessary for industry and commerce, and also served as a balance against the masses of Indians and blacks. In any case, that wave of migration was of great importance for the religious life of the continent. Many of those who hoped to immigrate were Protestants, and therefore several countries felt obliged to grant religious freedom, at first only to such immigrants, but eventually to all. The most notable consequence of immigration, however, was the enormous growth in the numbers of baptized Catholics for whom the church could provide practically no ministry nor religious instruction. As a result, Latin American Catholicism became more superficial. In great cities such as Buenos Aires and São Paulo, most still called themselves Catholics but few participated in the life of the church.

For a long time, the Catholic hierarchy responded to all this with futile attempts to return to the past. The more widespread the new ideas became, the more vehemently the hierarchy condemned them. Eventually, many Latin American Catholics came to see faith as something to be held independently and even against the authority of the church. Therefore, when Protestantism made its appearance, it found the fields ripe for harvest.