

## **Fundamentalism and the Politics of Intolerance**

Carina Gallegos

*More and more, in many countries of America, a system known as 'neoliberalism' prevails. Based on a purely economic conception of man, this system considers profit and the law of the market as its only parameters, to the detriment of the dignity of – and the respect due to – individuals and peoples.*

*Pope John Paul II  
Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in America. 22 January, 1999*

On January 1999, Pope John Paul II condemned neoliberalism in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*. Ever since, the Catholic Church has faced increasing contradictory views within its regional divisions. The interest of Latin American priests in economics, for example, has led them to further their education in economics and become actively involved within their political communities. As priests voice the Church's views and interpretations of neoliberalism, they target an audience that largely consists of the working class.

In Central America, the proposal to eradicate trading barriers between countries has acted as catalyst in accelerating the Catholic Church's political participation. In January 2002, US President George W. Bush began discussions of a free-trade agreement between Central American nations, Dominican Republic, and the US, an agreement that became known as the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). In a statement released by the White House regarding the importance of CAFTA, Central America was characterised as a region torn by "civil war, chaos, dictators and Communist insurgencies" during the 1980s. And as "a region of fragile democracies that need US support [...]" CAFTA, in turn, was described as a way for the US to support freedom, democracy and economic reform in our neighbourhood."

In July 2005, the US approved CAFTA, including Dominican Republic, (CAFTA-DR). This was ratified by all countries except Costa Rica. This is not the first time Costa Rica has proven to be an exception. Costa Rica is the only country in which the constitution prohibits the existence of an army; a worldwide exception – if not phenomenon – that proves to be even more remarkable when considering the revolting and unstable military history of Central America. Perhaps even more interesting is Costa Rica's level of economic prosperity. According to the World Bank's records, Costa Rica's levels of poverty fell from 31.9 percent in 1991 to 18.5 percent in 2003, while extreme poverty decreased from 11.7 percent to 5.1 percent during the same period of time.

Clearly, the previously mentioned statement from the White House places Costa Rica at odds with the rest of the Central American community as well as with the US Government's description of "fragile democracies." But where does it place Costa Rica regarding CAFTA?

“We can not deny the community of our country faces inequality in many senses, and that the fight against poverty is far from over. But the present proposal of CAFTA does not seem to alleviate any of our perils. Quite the contrary,” says Monsignor Jose Francisco Ulloa Rojas, President of the Permanent Committee of the Episcopal Conference.

The Church’s position plays a key role for Costa Rica’s government; with a population of four million people, it is estimated that 76.3% of Costa Ricans are practicing Roman Catholics. Due to its immense following, the archdioceses may be the tool that sways public opinion either for their decision to join CAFTA or against it.

The Church defines its social role in a statement issued by the Permanent Committee of the Episcopal Conference to the public: “As bishops of Costa Rica, we are aware of the social responsibility we hold as counsellors, as we accompany our people building a better future.” Concerning the position Costa Rica presently holds regarding CAFTA, the Committee openly expressed its hesitations: “We need to further evaluate who the beneficiaries of CAFTA are going to be – what portion of the population is going to suffer severe repercussions from which it may not be able to recover. We believe the current document of CAFTA holds Costa Rica’s poverty-stricken population to a disadvantage, and threatens to broaden the gap between rich and poor.”

Yet, while the majority of members of the Catholic Church challenge the implementation of CAFTA, Costa Rica’s recently elected president, Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias Sanchez, is a strong promoter. Negotiations will more than likely lead the country into joining the agreement, for better or worse. It is necessary to place a human face on free-trade agreements and globalisation in order to properly integrate the underprivileged into the economic spectrum of development. It is the Church’s hope that if Costa Rica does indeed decide to join CAFTA, the myriad of small-town churches that presently face east, will be able to continue facing that way... and not be obliged to face North.

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