

How will history judge Latin American churches' COVID response?

Likely with both praise and blame.

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SOCIAL DISTANCE: Chairs spaced apart at a church in Mogi Guaçu, Brazil, during the COVID-19 pandemic in August 2020. (Photo by blamed, used via creative commons license)

On the blessed day that the coronavirus pandemic finally ends, historians will have enormous opportunities to explore its immediate impacts and its lasting consequences. That is nowhere truer than in the area of religion and faith. How will congregations be remembered for their actions during this hideous time?

In the Christian context, many lessons both inspiring and troubling come from Latin America, which has suffered appallingly from the crisis, as badly as anywhere on the planet. Even by grossly understated official statistics, the combined death toll in the five largest nations in the region (Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Argentina)

reached a million this summer, almost a quarter of the global total. But in order to find a realistic estimate, we should probably multiply that dubious number by three. In Brazil alone, the true death toll to date is well over a million, including many young adults. Mexico has, in real numbers, lost over 600,000, about the same as the far more populous United States.

Vaccination rates across the region are abysmally low. In societies much poorer than those of Europe or North America, the economic and social effects have been devastating. Health-care systems that were already under deep strain have come close to collapse.

How have the churches responded? Some magnificently, some dreadfully. As in any outbreak of plague or pestilence throughout history, the churches' greatest contributions have been through succoring the needy. Across the continent, Catholic and Protestant churches alike have stepped forward to provide essential assistance that the state cannot, supplying food, fuel, and shelter. Brazilian clergy speak accurately of combating a "hunger pandemic." That country's Catholic Church has formed a vast and effective network of pastoral agents, to visit and assist the elderly and isolated. Although it is too early to project the long-term effects of the crisis, it is very likely that such activist congregations and agencies will benefit greatly from their good works, as poor urban populations are reminded yet again of how much they depend on such religious institutions.

But churches have also featured in more controversial roles. As in the United States, governments have sought to prevent the spread of infection by imposing lockdowns and restricting public gatherings. That has a special impact on churches that are used to coming together in the tens of thousands, not to mention on the great Catholic pilgrimages. In Mexico, many churches simply ignored the restraints and operated clandestine masses, publicized by social media.

In Brazil, some powerful evangelical and Pentecostal churches denounced the restraints as an unacceptable curtailing of their religious liberty, even as outright persecution. Such churches have organized public protests against the court decisions that supported lockdowns. In fairness, it should be said that a great many other congregations not only obeyed the laws but proved creative in organizing virtual services.

Making the issue even more sensitive, Brazil's authoritarian populist president Jair Bolsonaro (who is Catholic) maintains a close alliance with the most conservative evangelical churches. Bolsonaro notoriously characterized COVID as "just a little flu or the sniffles." Accordingly, he refused to organize any centralized response to the threat and spoke forcefully against preventive measures ordered by local authorities, not to mention his mocking of mask wearing and social distancing. At the worst of the crisis this spring, the lockdown controversy raised fears that the president might side with the dissident churches to the extent of defying the constitution and overruling both congress and the courts. Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic might yet lead to his impeachment.

Any religious history of the crisis would also tell how some churches have understood the pandemic in spiritual and providential terms, as a heavenly judgment. From this perspective, true believers might be able to escape the disease by means of prayer and spiritual warfare. We continue to find preachers urging the use of the traditional "plague psalm" (Ps. 91) and noting the coincidence that its number reverses COVID-19: 91, we are told, will defeat 19. Conservative pastors have urged believers to rely wholly on spiritual solutions, so that they do not need to obey the constraints that governments place on religious gatherings.

Such appeals to faith-based cures and spiritual protection should be seen as a desperate response to the lack of access to effective advanced medicine. It has left poorer believers in desperate search for anything that might conceivably offer hope for themselves and their loved ones. Where else can they turn?

Historians might already be tempted to assign praise or blame to the various participants in the crisis. It will take much longer, perhaps a decade or more, to determine just what the consequences will be for Latin America's religious scene.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The pandemic and the churches."