


CELAM study on Covid-19 and social concerns. Salvia (sociologist): 'The pandemic had a devastating impact on Latin American societies'

"The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic, social, political and environmental impacts are exacerbated by structural problems in Latin America and the Caribbean, severely marked by high rates of inequality, job insecurity and informal employment, lack of social protection, environmental degradation, poverty and vulnerability." On top of this, "the region is suffering from weak and inadequate health and social protection systems and by the development of sub-urban informal settlements that lack access to basic services. Large migratory flows and population displacements, along with various types of conflicts, are also common, and the consequences of the climate crisis are disproportionately felt in the region." This stark excerpt from a stark, carefully documented and factual analysis was presented by the Latin American Episcopal Council ([CELAM](#)) in its newly published report "[The social question under the Covid-19 scenario in Latin America.](#)" The study (due to be published in Italian on the CELAM website) was presented during CELAM's plenary session, held online from May 18 to 21. *The document is of great importance in two respects: firstly owing to updated content and comprehensive data, and secondly because it is the first document drawn up by the Knowledge Management Centre, a new service of the newly restructured CELAM.* It has been developed in conjunction with two 'networks': the Catholic University network on the continent, and the Social Inequalities Observatory and the Observatory on Poverty. Starting with the most well established, the Social Inequalities Observatory in the Catholic University of Argentina (UCA). 

. As he explained to SIR, "The impact of the pandemic on Latin American societies has been devastating, not least because it has exacerbated pre-existing problems, starting with inequality, that remains the highest in the world. In Latin America, many people are living on the streets, or in crowded and dilapidated housing located in the suburbs of large cities. Restrictions and isolation have affected these people most severely." Not to mention poor health services, dramatically evidenced during the subsequent pandemic waves in various countries, especially in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Argentina. **Worrying data.** Salvia points to eloquent data, partly obtained from the work of the Observatories, and partly from studies conducted by ECLAC, the UN Commission for Latin America. "In 2020, 8.4% of the world's population lived in the Latin American and Caribbean region. As of last December, 18.6% of COVID-19 infections and 27.8% of deaths caused by this disease were concentrated in this part of the world." With serious consequences: "One in five children on the continent is undernourished, 47% live in poor households. An estimated 47 million people have lost their jobs."

Latin America "is not coming out of the pandemic better than before."

The sociologist equally denounces rampant inequality rates (the top 10% own 70% of the wealth), environmental degradation, economies increasingly dependant on mining, growing migration from Venezuela and from Central America, coupled by governments' failure to resolve social tensions. Indeed, it is widely known that the outbreak of the pandemic suddenly 'emptied' the streets, which only a few weeks earlier had been filled with millions of protestors in most Latin American countries. The recent case of Colombia suggests that tensions in this period have increased and are on the verge of exploding. "National governments - Professor Salvia remarked - are unable and not strong enough to confront the issue of widespread popular discontent, as seen in Colombia. A new form of political authoritarianism is emerging in certain contexts." **A new social compact.** In continuity with the encyclical "Fratelli tutti", the CELAM study calls for a new season of participatory action, a culture of dialogue, a new social compact "understood as a political tool for effective structural transformation", open to the contribution of "major social movements and sectors, from the labour force to the most marginalised segments of society". According to Salvia, "the only way out of the

*crisis is through sustainable development". However, while recognising the usefulness of minimum income schemes in the current situation, "it is necessary to generate jobs and wealth. We need to invest more in human and social capital, but this cannot be done without jobs." In contrast, the ongoing rise in commodity prices risks paving the way for the longstanding 'shortcut' economy centred on mining or monocultures. In this context, the CELAM Report identifies a renewed role for Christian communities. "The renewal of CELAM, the networking of Catholic universities and Observatories is per se a powerful response," Salvia concludes. **A threefold dream.** In his introduction to the document, which features a large section devoted to pastoral challenges posed by the present circumstances, CELAM Secretary General Msgr. **Jorge Eduardo Lozano**, Archbishop of San Juan de Cuyo, writes: "We must transform social conditions with the power of the Gospel, wherein Jesus empathises with the hungry, the thirsty, with migrants and with the homeless. It is essential that this fundamental message be embraced, and continue to be the vision of women and men faithful to Jesus Christ at the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era." In this context "we firmly believe that systematic social studies will help the Latin American Church to fully understand the signs of the times and respond to the problems and needs of our present day." A change of structure is needed, writes the Secretary General of CELAM, because our social system is no longer sustainable today. Francis highlights the need to globalise hope, as opposed to the globalisation of exclusion, in order to put an end to inequality and to the throwaway culture. But a structural transformation of this kind requires a change of mentality. Indeed, the magisterium of Francis is, in a positive manner, "the fil rouge" of the Report, as evidenced by the elaboration of a triple dream, "ecological", "social" and "cultural", inspired by the exhortation "Querida Amazonia", which offers us a horizon of hope in challenging circumstances. (*) *journalist, "La vita del popolo"**

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