

COLOMBIA NEED FOR 'AUDACIOUS' CHANGES



• The Pope

THE POPE finally diagnosed the core of the problem of poverty when he called for sweeping land reform during his tour of Colombia.

On previous visits to Latin America, the Pope's intervention in social and economic issues has been interpreted largely as biased in favour of a conservative approach.

He has struck hard at those Catholic priests who have taken the gospel into the slums and fought for change, sometimes using Marxist concepts.

But now the Pope has staked his banner firmly in favour of land reform, by declaring that no one should forget that God's gifts to man could not be exclusive.

He was speaking on July 4 to at least 500,000 people from the slums of Bogota. And in a country where 68% of the cultivable land is owned by 4% of the population, the Pope's words were music.

He said he knew that the life of many peasants, who make up one-third of Colombia's population, consisted of "hard work in

the fields with inadequate wages ... without the benefits of a properly planned, audacious and effective agrarian reform".

But the Pope did not define an "audacious" reform. He limited himself to warning that the doctrine of the Church "excludes ... the organised struggle of classes which leads to new forms of slavery".

'Martyr' priest puts land reformers to test

WHEN President José Sarney of Brazil called into the Vatican on July 11 it was rather more than a courtesy call.

High on the agenda was his government's land reform policy, and the civil unrest it has provoked.

The Pope is concerned for the safety of many country priests, nuns and church workers, while President Sarney may well have expressed the view of, among others, his Justice Minister that the church itself has a lot to answer for. This is the historical scenario to the meeting:

In January 1985 Tancredo Neves was elected President on a land reform ticket. He died before taking office, but his successor, José Sarney, promised to rectify the gross imbalance in the distribution of land — 48% of Brazil's arable land is in the hands of 1% of land owners, while small holdings account for only 2.4% of farmland.

He proposed an ambitious scheme to resettle over 7m. families on 500m. acres of land by the year 2000 and appointed Nelson Ribeiro, a radical supported by the church, to carry it out. Plans to distribute 107m. acres amongst 1.4m. peasant farmers in the next four years were drafted.

The plan, not surprisingly, met with considerable opposition from rural landlords. Owners of vacant land hurriedly brought it into notional production while previously benevolent land owners began evicting longstand-

BRAZIL: Richard Mernane

ing tenants to reduce their liability to claims.

Urban landowners, too, started getting jumpy, arguing that "if the dispossessed can have our farms, how long before they demand our factories and flats?"

Gradually, the land-owning lobby in Congress persuaded President Sarney to adopt a more cautious approach and, last May, it scored a major triumph — the resignation of Mr. Ribeiro.

The new man at the Department of Agrarian Reform was Dante De Oliveira, a progressive with little time for the church. He announced the compulsory appropriation of 6,000 acres of land to resettle 7,600 families. This brought the total resettled so far this year to just over 10,000, against a target of 150,000 by the end of the year.

Mr. De Oliveira also announced a slight modification to the resettlement scheme. Instead of using privately-owned land the government would, in future, distribute federal land. What Mr. De Oliveira did not say, however, was that most of this land is in the remote Amazon regions, is rife with disease and unproductive.

Against this backdrop of governmental cynicism the rural

areas themselves are on the brink of civil war. In Imeratriz, the scene of some of the worst clashes, bands of gunmen, sponsored by land owners, stalk the streets. Peasant leaders and priests receive death threats almost daily. In the last 18 months about 300 have been killed.

On May 10 Father Josimo Tavares, a young priest and one of the more vocal supporters of the poor, was shot in the back as he arrived at his office. To the land-owners his was just another death. "Why such a fuss about one priest ...?" asked one of Imeratriz's city councillors, "killing for land is in the blood of the Brazilians".

To the powerful and increasingly impatient church, however, Tavares is seen as "the martyr of land reform". As the Bishop of Imeratriz and Caroline said: "It's more than the death of a priest. It's the crucial test of whether this government will or won't carry out land reform".

Brazil, the largest and potentially most wealthy country in South America, is today a nation racked by civil strife, industrial chaos and horrendous debt. Its land reform policy, which could provide the solution to so many of its problems, has run out of steam. Will a papal blessing be enough to get it back on the rails?