

Citizens at the heart of a people

Ursula Lonngi

The goal of the non-profit legal foundation, Academia Latinoamericana de Líderes Católicos (Catholic Leaders Latin-American Academy), is the formation of a new generation of lay Catholics across the Latin-American continent to assume their responsibility for the common good in the light of the social teaching of the Church. Born in conjunction with various other social projects, it promotes diverse training programs in leadership and social initiative. Ursula Lonngi, a Mexican educator at the major seminary of Coatzacoalco and member of the executive committee of the Academy, highlights the foundation's work.

The Academia Latinoamericana de Líderes Católicos¹ was founded in 2014 through the initiative of the late Chilean Cardinal, Jorge Medina, former prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments and Mexican political scientist, José Antonio Rosas Amor.

Equipped with only minimal resources and structures, it is already present in nine Latin American countries. Its activities are founded on six pillars:

- communion with the Church as a living, affective and effective adherence to the Pope and bishops;
- leadership as service, especially to the marginalized;
- politics as a multifaceted action to promote the common good;
- cross-sectional commitment to inclusion and dialogue among diverse social, political and ecclesial realities;
- an interdisciplinary approach to ongoing collaboration between academics, clergy, social and political leaders;
- professionalism and a passionate search for love that can be expressed in the smallest of details because Church and society deserve the best of us.

The *Academia* curriculum provides different levels of training, from courses for high school and university students, to training aimed at formation of adult Catholic leaders.

A Catholic political party or Catholics in politics?

When asked if the Academy's goal is to form new Catholic political parties, Professor Rosas Amor clearly states: "The *Academia Latinoamerica* does not focus on the political unity of Catholics but rather on the catholic unity of politics, in the light of the plurality that is part of our richness as believers. We do not aim for "Catholic politicians" but rather "Catholics in politics." Our Christian identity is first and foremost an identity and not a specific role or preference for particular political parties. We are Christians first. Then, with this as our point of departure, we participate and work in politics. So, it is from this perspective – forming Catholics in politics and not Catholic politicians – that education and formation is, above all, a dimension of evangelization. In other words, hoping to train Catholics in politics implies a recognition that we speak first and foremost of forming “missionary-disciples."

In the face of extreme polarization across the continent, one finds hope in Rosas Amor's affirmations that "the task of politicians is to be a sign of unity" and the strength of one's service to the common good consists in a capacity for dialogue and "not in working to build walls and divisions within society." For this reason, he reiterates, "a fundamental part of our consistency as Christians and as politicians is in our commitment and search for communion, charity and dialogue, in defense of life from its conception to natural death, and in working with those most impoverished and marginalized."

School for leaders of the people

Following the path set out by Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti*, the first meeting of the *Latin-American Academy for Catholic Leaders* took place from September 11 to November 27, 2021, in collaboration with *Caritas* (Latin America), the Latin American and Caribbean Ecclesial Network on Migration, Shelter, Displacement and Trafficking (CLAMOR), *Finis Terrae* University (Chile), *Católica Lumen Gentium* (Mexico), *Católica del Táchira*, and *Católica Cecilio Acosta* (Venezuela). The conference, entitled 'Citizens at the Heart of a People', involved 500 Latin American participants deeply committed to social, political and economic transformation.

The intent is to train leadership that is truly for the people, skilled in building bridges and transforming the face of the continent. An inaugural intervention by Cardinal Alvaro Ramazzini Imeri on the topic, *What happens to Latin America*, and Cardinal Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel's concluding theme on *The Identity and Vocation of Latin America* offered a framework for the Academy's educational development.

According to the vision underlying this initiative, a 'leader for the people' is one who *lives with* and *works with* the people, who *walks with* them and shares in their daily lives. He or she does not engage like an elite representative trying to solve problems from afar, without mixing with the people.

It is about being workers for peace and thereby being builders of a new civilization.

This method of *seeing-judging-acting* is a well-proven one that integrates five formative modules: spirituality and the keys to Catholic leadership in political life; Christian discernment in Latin America; principles, judgement criteria and paths of action relative to

Church social doctrine; tools for popular leadership in the global context; actions and proposals for popular leadership in Latin America.

Requirements for participant certification included: 12 five-hour weekend sessions, 4 examinations on study materials and final essays and group projects to apply content and ensure interaction with others which reflect the reality one is living in. The course involved a total of 60 classroom hours and an additional 40 hours of individual study. The teaching staff consists of 30 professors, academics and representatives engaged with people in Latin America and Europe, including high-level experts in each of the 30 topics which are addressed.

The witness of four key players

José Antonio Rosas and Elvy Monzant, heads of the initiative, explain: *'We would like to awaken sleeping consciences and elicit a human and ecological conversion, one that places life at the center and puts an end to the idolatry of money. We want to form real citizens not as a crowd, but as persons, as a people; to give legitimacy to leaders who, day after day, find themselves at human and existential frontiers, working to knock down walls and build bridges of solidarity.'*

Fr. Héctor Carabantes Piñón, who worked as a trade union representative before his call to the priesthood, is now among the teachers of this unique experience: *'We are experiencing something exceptional. Personally, it was a relieving of many moments of my own history as a student and trade union leader, moments revisited and enriched by the thoughts and experiences shared by numerous grass roots leaders, participants in the school from around the world. There are 55 of us from the diocese of Nezahualcóyotl in Mexico, with one of the youth projects receiving municipal support to help with its implementation.'*

Professor Rocco Buttiglione, International Governing Council member: *In Latin America we need leaders with hearts for the people and a broad understanding of the complex situation, leaders who trust in the people and earn the people's trust. We need leaders who know how to speak to the people, listen to them and bring their voices into the great debates of a globalized society. This is the purpose of the School for Leaders for the People.*

¹ <https://liderescatolicos.net/index.html> and <https://laityinvolved.org/project/catholic-leaders-latin-american-academy/>