

ROUNDTABLE (/ROUNDTABLE)

## Missionary, Go Home!

In 1968, maverick Catholic priest Ivan Illich addressed a group of Americans headed abroad for philanthropic projects. He told them to stay home.

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IMAGE: Ivan Illich at home, 1976. Photograph by Bernard Diederich. © The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images.

**I**t has become a rite of passage for privileged young Americans to spend a year abroad doing service projects—installing toilets, teaching English, and purveying other rudiments of progress. For many of those embarking on such journeys, there is a further rite of passage: reading the text of a 1968 speech (<http://ciasp.ca/CIASPhistory/IllichCIASPspeech.htm>) by Monsignor Ivan Illich, a Catholic priest. Illich's speech usually appears under the title "To Hell with Good Intentions," after one of its most telling passages. Illich's argument was an assault on the idea that affluent Americans have any help worth offering poor people abroad—in this case, in Mexico. Attempts to help, said Illich, do more harm than good.

Illich delivered his address in Chicago at a regional meeting of the Conference on Interamerican Student Projects, which was populated by organizers from groups that sent young people abroad for service. They represented the spirit of benevolent expansionism that President Kennedy had promoted at the start of the decade through programs like the Peace Corps and, for Latin America in particular, the Alliance for Progress.

At the time, too, Illich's Catholic Church was joining in the excitement. From the pope on down, there was an initiative underway for sending 40,000 foot soldiers—a full 10 percent of then-plentiful U.S. priests and nuns, along with lay volunteers—to serve their poorer and less well-catechized neighbors in Latin America. Missionaries would carry out charitable works while lovingly upgrading native religiosity with European doctrines and devotions. Such missionizing aligned neatly with the imperatives of the Cold War—a holy

