

BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES: A MEETING POINT OF ECCLESIOLOGIES

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THEOLOGY IN Latin America, as verified in the reflection underlying the final document of the Third General Assembly of the Latin American Bishops that was held in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, is directly related to the reality of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs in English; CEBs in Portuguese and Spanish). Hence that theology offers a valid set of instruments for their analysis and interpretation. The same can be said of the various theologies of liberation. Although in one or another version they may not dovetail exactly with the theological frontiers of Puebla, liberation theologies are a meaningful and important way to approach and understand BECs.

WHAT ARE THE BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES?

For the sake of precision, let me make clear what BEC means in the context of this article. The currently so-called Basic Communities, Basic Christian Communities, Grassroots Christian Communities, or Basic Ecclesial Communities in different parts of the world share some common and fundamental features. However, at the present level of ecclesiological awareness as it is mirrored in the specialized theological literature, we can hardly talk about the current phenomenon of BECs in a general, univocal way. They are a diversified reality from which we can draw an analogical concept. They offer a certain unity in their diversity. Even within a more homogeneous scenario such as Latin America, there are significant differences between the BECs in Brazil, in Peru, in El Salvador, or Nicaragua, for instance, which prevent us from talking of them without further specification. To write on the BECs in a scholarly fashion, therefore, we need a concrete point of reference. Here this will be the BECs in the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil. From such a specific point of reference it is possible then to relate to other analogical cases.

I do not pretend to give a clear-cut definition or even a description of the Brazilian BECs. This would deprive them of one of their fundamental traits, namely, flexibility, openness to change and to reverse patterns, something which is very much linked to real life. Let me make explicit some of their major characteristics.

First, they are *communities*. They are trying to set a pattern of

Christian life which is deliberately in contrast with the individualistic, self-interested, and competitive approach to ordinary life so inherent in the Western, modern-contemporary culture. As a result of their own unfolding evolution in the last 25 years or so, BECs in Brazil have been aiming at living the two dimensions of communion and participation. By stressing communion, the BECs want to live faith not as a privatized but as a shared, real experience which is mutually nurtured and supported. Such a deep level in faith sharing is at the roots of an attempt to improve interpersonal relationships within the community. This then makes possible the dimension of participation especially in the decision-making process, in contrast with a rather passive attitude of the faithful or a too vertical orientation in exercising power or authority by the clergy or by the laity.

Secondly, the BECs are *ecclesial*. The catalysts of this ecclesiality in the Brazilian BECs have been the unity in and of faith and the linkage to the institutional Church. Even when BECs are ecumenically oriented, experience has proven that the sharing of a specific, common faith was a crucial element for fostering the internal growth of the community. This is particularly important because of the paramount significance of the Word of God and biblical-prayer sharing in BECs life. By linking themselves to the institutional Church, BECs want to reverse the confrontational and/or hostile approach to the hierarchy that used to be a hallmark of Basic Communities in the sixties, especially in Italy and France or in the so-called "underground church" in the United States. This does not mean that the BECs must be started by a clerical initiative, although many have indeed been. It means, though, that however originated, the BECs look for recognition and support by the pastors or by the bishops, even when enjoying a fair amount of internal autonomy.

Thirdly, BECs are *basic (de base)*. Being predominantly a gathering of active lay people, they are said to be "at the base" of the Church, from an ecclesiastic point of view, as related to the hierarchical Church structure. Moreover, in Brazil and in many Third World countries, the BECs are "at the base" of society as well. In fact, most of the thousands and thousands of BEC members are poor. This is not an exclusive option but an understandable fact. The poor feel in a stronger way the need for community, for mutual support. They are less sophisticated in shaping their interpersonal relationships because they have less to lose. They are more open to participation because more pressed by common needs. Finally, they are more sensitive to the gift because they realize their personal and societal needs. Thus they hardly take things for granted or as if deserved. This opens their hearts to faith, which is part of the gift-economy of salvation and liberation. Moreover, being at the base makes

it easier for BECs to link faith and real, everyday life. On the grounds of the gospel demands, they realize the need for the transformation of a society whose organization is in itself unjust in many aspects and very much the source of their own poverty. Thus faith is not locked in the mind and even less within the private, individual horizon. Faith is a dynamic factor of personal conversion and societal transformation.

In an earlier stage the BECs in Brazil were thought of as a way to improve the life of parishes. Progressively it became clear that such a model of communion and participation, such a quality of interpersonal relations, were not possible in a large-scale group or at a highly developed level of social organization. Without losing the linkage to the parishes, BECs multiplied within each parish, keeping their spontaneity and flexibility. Today there is no pretense of making of a parish a community in the terms of BECs. This would hardly be possible in sociological terms. The life of a parish, however, can be significantly improved by the presence of many BECs that gather between 20 and 50 people in general and can occasionally interact for common purposes within the parish.

For historical and sociological reasons, Brazil has been a land chronically short of priests (a situation that is starting to loom elsewhere too). In previous times people would confine their active church life to the periodic and scarce presence of the ordained minister. With BECs the growing awareness of the diversity of vocations and of their respective responsibility in the Church led them to consider the priest as a part of the BEC and not above it. In his absence, however, the community goes on in its ordinary life, be it at the level of internal church affairs (prayer and biblical groups, preparation for the sacraments, attention to the sick, renewal and ongoing formation programs, and so on), be it in the field of concrete commitments to action in the social and political realm. Links to the parish or the diocese are kept, of course, and they remain the main source in the preparation of written material for several projects (biblical papers, liturgy of the word, etc.). But life does not rest upon the initiative of the clergy and even less on the need for its constant involvement or required approval. This leads to a growing decentralization of church life which, however, fits within the parameters of a broad and all-embracing planning by the parishes, the dioceses, and even a very active and well-organized Bishops Conference at a national level or in each one of its 15 regions in the country.

The further elaboration of this article will provide the reader with more detailed information on what BECs mean in this precise context. It is important to bear in mind that taking Brazil as a case study for methodological reasons should not turn out to be an exclusive or narrowing focus. Having a specific point of reference helps us to have a context

for thinking, to be precise on what we are talking about, and to make possible a concrete comparative approach to our own ecclesial situation or perspective.

BEC: A WAY OF BEING CHURCH

The growing literature on BECs has accustomed us to think of them mainly, if not exclusively, in terms of Latin American ecclesiology; and one of the postulates of this ecclesiology is that the BECs are not simply a movement or association in the Church but rather *a way of being Church*.

I start from this position, which I myself share, but in this article I would like to look at the issue from a different angle. It may help to broaden ecclesiological perception vis-à-vis our BECs, as well as their scope and significance for the Church as a whole. If indeed the BECs are a way of being Church, then they, like the Church, can be read and interpreted by distinct ecclesiologies. The reading will be more or less adequate in a given case, particularly when it has to do not so much with a more or less abstract concept of the Church but rather with its concrete embodiment in a given local area: the Brazilian Church, for example.

I intend in this article to link up the BECs with several major ecclesiologies of European-American extraction in the last 30 years or so. Those ecclesiologies were not thought out in terms of BECs, so the linkup may serve two purposes. First, on the basis of premises that are not just Latin American, it will check out the proposition that BECs are truly a way of being Church. Second, it will show that such ecclesiologies can be enriched and opened to new horizons in the light of BECs.

Let me mention two further points. First, we clearly have a wide and varied *multiplicity* of ecclesiological standpoints. Each one, taken individually, brings out the richness of the aspect it highlights, while at the same time leaving other possible dimensions in impoverished silence. The very plurality of ecclesiologies reveals the inability of any given one to exhaust the mystery of the Church. Understanding the Church, and BECs as a mode of embodying the Church, will always entail the meeting and linking up of various ecclesiological intuitions. It can never be a linkup with one exclusively. Indeed, in principle it should embrace them all, though of course with differing tones and stresses. My second point has to do with the present level of ecclesiological awareness, in which difference of focus is not due solely to difference in the aspect treated. It also depends on the *historical frame of reference* that serves as the backdrop for the reflection process. Theology carried on in the First World or inspired by it has been less explicit about that context, but it nevertheless bears the marks of it. For Third World theology in general,

and Latin American theology specifically, that frame of reference is inescapable, clearly putting its mark on theological method and its final product.

This article may help us to see that these ways of doing theology are not mutually exclusive. By the same token, the Church, reflecting consciously on the mystery that it is, can derive benefit from this plurality. It can again take up the problem of its unity on the basis of presuppositions that do not rest upon uniformity in its process of theological reflection. The BECs may serve here as a focus and means for verifying this proposition.

Among possible methodological options, I would like to single out three that are embodied in works of comparative ecclesiology. The first identifies the ecclesiological perspective, organizing the thought of each author around a dominant tendency in his works; this was the approach used by Batista Mondin.¹ The second defines a theoretical frame at the start and then uses it to compare distinct ecclesiologies, authors, or "schools"; such was the approach used by Alvaro Quiroz Magaña in his thesis.² The third inductively works out ecclesiological models on the basis of various authors, suggesting the viability and even necessity of using different models to articulate an ecclesiology; that has been the approach of Avery Dulles in several works.³

Since it does not focus mainly on authors as Mondin does, or anticipate any theoretical grid as does Quiroz Magaña, Dulles' method lends itself best to my objective here. I want to verify whether and how BECs bear the chief marks of the Church that have been underscored in recent ecclesiologies outside Latin America, and how BECs can amplify and shed light on the content of those ecclesiologies in a different way. Taking my inspiration from Dulles' method, then, I will try to expand the content of his analysis in *Models of the Church* by focusing specifically on BECs. In his later work, *A Church To Believe in*, Dulles really ends up proposing a sixth model (the Church as a community of disciples), but I shall not consider that model specifically here. Its synthetic-integrative character is less adequate to my analytic-comparative purpose here.

In *Models of the Church* Dulles proposes the following ecclesiological

¹ Batista Mondin, *Le nuove ecclesiologie: Un'immagine attuale della Chiesa* (Rome: Paoline, 1980).

² Alvaro Quiroz Magaña, *Eclesiología en la teología de la liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1983).

³ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in All Its Aspects* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974); *A Church To Believe in* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

models: Church as institution, communion, sacrament, herald, and servant. I shall briefly present the fundamentals of each model, reflecting on the relationship of BECs to the model in question.

Church As Institution

This is the model to which we have been traditionally accustomed. It solidified over the centuries, and we were evangelized and theologically educated in it until the 1950s. Its main thrust lies in understanding the Church as a society, indeed as a perfect society. Its underlying Christology views Christ as prophet, priest, and king, with the threefold function of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling. That mission is carried out by virtue of the power which Christ received from God, and which he confers on those who in fact possess authority and jurisdictional power in the Church: the pope, bishops, and priests. Thus the ecclesiological accent is on the organization and dispensation of power, hence on the juridical dimension. This stress shows up on the three planes of doctrine, sacrament, and administration, which are explicitly linked up with their divine origin. The logical result is the excessive growth in the Church of the clerical and institutional dimension and the relative atrophy of the charismatic element as well as of the significance of the People of God, particularly the laity. Proper membership in the Church is defined as acceptance of the same doctrine, communion in the same sacraments, and obedient subjection to the same pastors—all that being visibly verified.

Obviously the relationship of this paradigm to BECs is remote, by virtue of the characteristics of both the model and BECs. The predominantly vertical conception of power, the resultant structural organization, and the primacy and hegemony accorded to clerical initiative and activity represent something very different from what BECs are actually seeking and fleshing out in their way of being and living the reality of the Church.

By the same token, however, BECs in Brazil, as I said, do contrast with basic communities that have arisen in the First World, particularly with those that arose in the 1960s. Brazilian BECs almost always arise through the initiative of the hierarchy and are sustained by their support. Working alongside lay pastoral agents, priests and religious also provide inspiration and motivation. Bishops and priests exercise jurisdictional power over Brazilian BECs, and the latter recognize and accept this because they consciously regard themselves as an integral part of the institutional life of the Church as a whole. Thus Brazilian BECs are not resistant to the Church as institution, they do not pose an alternative to it, nor do they absolutize their own way of being Church. Instead they see themselves as a vital part of the Church, without which they would have no meaning.

Taking all these factors into account, we can see that, from an analytical point of view, the Church-as-institution model hardly serves as the dominant ecclesiological inspiration or perspective in the rise of BECs and their actual working.

Church As Sacrament

"The Church exists in Christ as a sacrament or sign and an instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (*Lumen gentium*, no. 1). With these words Vatican II summarily echoes and ratifies a theme that was much in evidence in the Church Fathers (Cyprian and Augustine) and in the age of scholasticism (Thomas Aquinas). Its elaboration in terms of a more general ecclesiological perspective, however, is fairly recent. This newer perspective views the Church as a sacrament. One felicitous effort of this sort was by Otto Semmelroth, and his work inspired many others.⁴ Henri de Lubac also made a significant contribution to this approach by using patristic and medieval sources.⁵ He linked up two dimensions: the Christological—for us Christ is the sacrament of God; and the ecclesiological—for us the Church is the sacrament of Christ. All the sacraments are essentially sacraments of the Church. The sacraments derive their power of grace from the Church, and through them the Church becomes the sacrament it is. Here we have a linkage between the model of the Church as institution (which stresses the visible reality of the socio-ecclesiastical dimension) and the model of the Church as communion (which stresses the socio-ecclesial dimension rooted primordially in the inner union of faith, hope, and love). In the Church-as-sacrament model the whole congregation of the faith comes together in all its diverse vocations and functions. That explains the fecundity of this approach, which has been explored ecclesologically by many theologians, particularly since World War II.⁶

A sacrament is a sign of something really present, the visible form of an invisible grace. It is an efficacious sign, producing or intensifying the reality it signifies. The sacraments, then, contain the grace they signify and confer the grace they contain. In tradition the sacraments have always been associated with the social dimension of the Church, not with the isolated individual, even though they are administered and received by individuals. For the human being, then, the sacraments bring together

⁴ Otto Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* (Frankfurt/Main: Knecht, 1953).

⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme* (Paris: Aubier, 1948).

⁶ See the following works by way of example: Leonardo Boff's doctoral dissertation, *Die Kirche als Sakrament im Horizont der Welterfahrung: Versuch einer Legitimation und einer struktur-funktionalistischen Grundlegung der Kirche im Anschluss an das II. Vatikanische Konzil* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1972); Yves Congar, "L'Eglise, sacrement universel du salut," in *Cette église que j'aime* (Paris: Cerf, 1968) 41–63; P. Smulders, "L'Eglise, sacrement du salut," in G. Baraúna, ed., *L'Eglise de Vatican II 2* (Paris: Cerf, 1967) 331–38.

and link the visible and invisible orders as well as the individual and social planes.

We can sum this up by saying that Christ is a sacrament and so is the Church. Christ is the sign and visible presence of the invisible God, the efficacious power of salvation for the individual and the whole People of God. As institution and communion, the Church is the sign and visible presence of Christ: accepted by faith and lived both really and mystically by the ecclesial community in the unity of the same faith. Indeed, the Church is even more sacrament than sign. Through its visible actions the Church not only signifies but dynamically produces and makes visible the reality of salvation that it represents and announces. The Church, then, is a grace-happening, and not just in the sense that it effects and administers the sacraments. It is a grace-happening as well because in the life of believers, who are the Church, we see operating and unfolding faith, hope, love, freedom, justice, peace, reconciliation, and everything else that establishes human intercommunion and humanity's communion with God.

Now let us see how the BECs look in the light of this model, the Church as sacrament.

1. From our examination of the Church-as-institution model, there is no doubt that the BECs see themselves as Church, as part of the visible, institutional, sociological body of the Church, and that they are a specific way of living as such. We also find Church as sacrament in the BECs. They are it *within the Church itself* insofar as they better embody the ecclesial range and presence of lay people, or the poor, in the Church—two features less evident in the Church's concrete structures and functions in recent centuries. Lay people and poor people share a core reality. They are both of the grass-roots level, of the base: lay people in the Church, poor people in the world. Consequently we get thereby a visible, ecclesial sign of Christ's own kenosis, a fundamental Christological dimension (Phil 2:5–11), which had not found suitable expression in the Church-as-institution model as lived in the past few centuries. This Christological tie-in, which is lived intensely in BECs, serves as an instrument of grace for bishops, priests, and religious who accept, recognize, or even share the BEC way of being Church.

2. The BECs have emerged from within a *traditional Catholicism*. In Brazil that Catholicism was centered around sacramentalization; little effort was put into clear-cut evangelization and explanation of the faith. Both in pedagogical intent and in actual practice, BECs put less stress on the traditional approach of sacramentalization.

This is obvious insofar as the older focus on administering and receiving the sacraments signified and reaffirmed the hegemony of ordained authority and power. This was characteristic of the earlier pastoral

approach or flowed naturally from it. In the cities it took the form of regular administration of the sacraments. In rural areas and the interior it took the form of rapid discharge of various sacramental obligations (baptism, confirmation, marriage, penance, and Eucharist) in a very short period, on those rare or sporadic occasions when ordained ministers of the sacraments were on hand (the Brazilian-coined word to say it is *desobriga*, literally "discharge of obligation"). In both cases the tenor was more individual than communitarian. Administration of the sacraments frequently took place without proper doctrinal preparation and without rightly establishing the inner dispositions required for meeting the ethical and ecclesial prerequisites for participation in the sacraments. Thus sacramentalization was not tied into a clear ecclesial awareness of the scope and significance of the sacraments. The forms of sacramental expression and preparation for them were associated mainly, indeed almost exclusively, with the ordained minister, who was and still is scarce and much overworked in Brazil.

Through their functions and services, current BECs have been filling in for ordained authority insofar as they can. Church as sacrament, in the terms indicated by *Lumen gentium*, finds expression in many ways. The overwhelming growth of sacred authority and power (the first model) had led historically to exclusive attribution of all that to the clergy. Today lay people, in BECs and other ecclesial areas, are serving as ministers to the sick and Eucharistic ministers. They are preparing individuals and communities for baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist. And they are performing other functions for the immediate human and Christian well-being of individuals and communities. All these activities are clear signs of the Church as sacrament and its efficacious presence, which is not restricted to the seven sacraments alone. The fundamental change is the fact that this whole complex is seen in an ecclesial context. Without denying the vocational and ministerial role and importance of the clergy, BECs have ceased to be wholly dependent on them. The ordained minister takes his place once again within a community growing increasingly aware of its diverse vocations and functions, which are the presence of grace in the world, for the lowly in particular.

3. Insofar as *the seven sacraments* as such are concerned, BECs cannot fully realize the Church as sacrament in the anointing of the sick and two other basic points. They are promoters of reconciliation at the level of interpersonal relations between their members, but they cannot effect reconciliation as sacrament. Builders of communion as the only viable root of community, their members cannot realize the full significance of the mystery of the Eucharist. These sacraments, which are an indispensable part of Christian life, are bound up with the ordained minister.

Given the current discipline of the Church and the envisioned requisites of formation and life style, there is no way of providing BECs with such ministers. BECs are multiplying rapidly and sporadically in rural areas and urban peripheries. There are not enough priests for them either quantitatively or qualitatively. By "qualitatively" here, I am not so much referring to the ministerial qualifications of the priest or his fulfilment of the juridical requisites for exercising his pastoral ministry. I am referring to the suitable adaptation of the priestly type to the BEC way of being Church. For the BEC has its own proper form of communion and participation, integrating various vocations into a more decentralized overall pastoral design based on subsidiarity.

This is the present situation, and in the foreseeable future there does not seem to be any thought on the part of the Church as institution to give BECs, or the rest of the Church for that matter, any alternative to the present form of the sacrament of holy orders or to the prerequisites for its reception and exercise. This is a very serious problem affecting churches that are heavily nurtured by the word of God and that consolidate the bonds of communion between their members by fostering ecclesial awareness. In traditional Catholicism and the *desobriga* paradigm, the Eucharistic question was relativized in one or another way: either the ecclesial significance of the sacrament of the Eucharist was not perceived, or the pertinent law of the Church was fulfilled, not very often but enough to be considered satisfactory. In the living Church embodied by BECs we see, first and foremost, a keen awareness of the structural significance of the Eucharist in the Church as sacrament. They are acutely aware of the necessity of the Eucharist, but also of the actual impossibility of their having the Eucharist with its full meaning and reality.

This problem cannot be solved adequately by allowing for exceptions or by occasional casuistic interpretations. It will have to be faced by the Church as part and parcel of its overall pastoral responsibility. The latter must take into account the concrete, diversified reality of the ecclesial body in the world as well as the salvific function of the Church as sacrament, whose core is the Eucharist. Placed at the disposal of human beings, the Eucharist is meant to be the efficacious font of communion between believers, and of their communion with God in Jesus Christ.

Church As Herald

In this model the Church is seen primarily as the bearer of the word of God. Receiving that word, it is to pass it on to human beings. Its proclaiming is also a convoking, bringing together those who hear and accept the word in faith and who are maintained in faith and union by the strength of the word. Thus the word is constitutive of the Church.

The Church is the herald of the word, however, not its ultimate addressee. The Church receives the word to announce it. Thus the word emerges as the crucial axis of an ecclesiological perspective that is kerygmatic, prophetic, and missionary.

The two preceding models sprouted on Catholic soil and are cultivated there. This model, on the other hand, was nurtured by Protestant reflection. In this century it has been cultivated by Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann in particular. Some of its intuitions share a common subsoil with more ancient Catholic tradition, however, and they emerged again in Vatican II to find theological expression in a Catholic and ecumenical way.

In the work of Barth, the Church is the living community of the living Christ.⁷ God calls it into being by His grace and gives it life by means of His Word and His Spirit, with a view to His kingdom. Thus the Church is not a permanent fact, an institution, much less an object of faith. It comes about by God's action. It is an event constituted by the power of the word of God in Scripture, made real today and announced to human beings. This proclaimed word gives rise to faith, a gift from God that is outside human control. There is no authority in the Church except the word of God, which is to be left free to call into question the Church itself. Through God's word the Church is renewed and, above all, urged on to its mission: constant proclamation of the salvific event, Jesus Christ, and of the advent of God's kingdom. This is the core of Barth's message. The word and its proclamation are not meant to reinforce confessional, institutional, social, or political positions, or to abet the expansion of the Church as a society.

In the work of Bultmann⁸ two crucial points must be considered with regard to ecclesiology. First, there is his nonhistorical conception of the Church. The result is the absence of any solid sociological or institutional dimension for the Church, and indeed the absence of any intention in Christ himself to establish or build it. Hence the identification of the Church with a historical datum or phenomenon remains ever paradoxical. Second, for Bultmann the word of God remains central, along with its proclamation as call, appeal, and invitation. But his view here is not the same as Barth's. Let us look at it a bit more closely.

Bultmann, more exegete than systematic theologian, sees the Church

⁷ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 4/3 (Munich: Kaiser, 1935 and 1967). For a systematic presentation of Barth's ecclesiology vis-à-vis Catholic ecclesiology, see the work of Colm O'Grady published by G. Chapman in London: Vol. 1, *The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth* (1968); Vol. 2, *The Church in Catholic Theology: Dialogue with Karl Barth* (1969).

⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, "Kirche und Lehre im Neuen Testament," in *Glauben und Verstehen* 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1966) 153-87; *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1948). Both works have been translated into English: *Faith and Understanding; A Theology of the New Testament*.

as a Pauline creation. It is so on three levels. It is a community of worship, an eschatological community, and a community with a vocation. In the first, the word is proclaimed. In the second, God is made present in the acceptance of Jesus by human beings. In the third, the first becomes prophetic vocation, kerygma that calls for a decision. The ecclesial event emerges in this kerygmatic tension of summons and response that the word brings with it, always assuming someone with credentials who proclaims it and/or a community that hears it and takes on the commitment. The Church comes to be in this faith-happening, which frees the context from any institutional, normative, or legitimating instance. The Church is actuated whenever the kerygma unleashes the summons of God and the response of human beings.

There are clear differences between Barth and Bultmann. But they also have a basic affinity with regard to the significance and active role of the word in constituting the Church as a happening. These two theologians assume the importance of the community to which the word is addressed. The word is the glue around which the community gathers. The response of faith given to the word by the community is what gives the latter its meaning and reason for being.

Here we can see the clear difference between the Protestant and the Catholic perspective vis-à-vis this model. Vatican II stresses that the Word became human, became flesh. Christ lives on in history through the Church, manifesting in it his message and saving activity; but there he also shares his own being with humans. In the Catholic version the Church-as-institution model is also brought into relationship with the word. The Church as a whole—and some in it by specific function—has the responsibility of watching over the proclamation and interpretation of the word. The Church's magisterium is not above the word, as Barth claimed. It is under the word, deriving from that word its starting point, its norm, and its nourishment. In and for the community, the magisterium is the instance of Christ's power and authority with regard to the fidelity and continuity of his message. The community that hears and accepts it is not just called to proclaim it and bear witness to it; it must also translate it into real-life action on both the individual and the social levels.

The word of God is central in the ecclesiological outlook of BECs. For them it is the immediate point of reference, the source of inspiration, nourishment, and discernment. Quite often it is the primary catalyst of community. Unlike the sacraments, which are not always accessible, the word is always within their reach. But there are profound differences between the BEC focus on the word and that to be found in the ecclesiologies of Barth or Bultmann.

1. In BECs the word is received *within the Church and as Church* insofar as the BEC is a way of being Church, or insofar as it is located in the bosom of the Church as institution and united with it. This implies the permanent reality of the Church to which the word is addressed. It also implies acceptance of the magisterium, the function in the Church that watches over the interpretation of the word and our fidelity to it.

2. In BECs the word naturally is conveyed through Scripture, which is read, prayed, and reflected upon; but all this is done *in direct relationship with life*. One could put it the other way and say: in BECs the everyday life of the members, the Church, and the world are read, prayed over, and reflected upon in relation to the word of God. If it is true for BECs that the Bible is the word of God, it is no less true that God also speaks to us in the language of real life. Bible and life shed light on each other for those who look to them for meaning in faith. The faith and spirituality of BECs are grounded on this foundation.

3. In BECs the symbiosis of *word and life* is the key to the process of evangelization. In the earlier pastoral paradigm, and particularly in the quick discharge of sacramental obligation (*desobriga*), there was little space for the word. The faithful received the word in a largely passive way. Their faith was receptive, but it did not feel summoned to commitment and radiation. There was no urgency toward a lasting conversion, on both the individual and social level, as a radical consequence of hearing and assimilating the word. This sort of profound transformation (*metanoia*) and the proclamation of the word to others characterize the BECs insofar as they embody Church as herald, Church of the word of God. Unlike Barth's view, however, this proclamation is not dissociated from the world and its problems; it is in solidarity with them. Nor is it turned in on the Church and the community of believers, who are exclusively focused on an eschatological kingdom of a future sort. In BECs the word is a summons to lives being lived in the Church and already preparing the kingdom. It summons them to call into question both the individual person and the world, in order to shape a just society that will turn the word into reality and embody the gospel project in a coherent way.

4. In BECs, then, the word is *kerygmatic* and *prophetic*, as it was for Bultmann. It is that insofar as it is the center of a community of frequent *de facto* non-Eucharistic worship, which lay people can celebrate without the ordained minister they lack. The word is also kerygmatic and prophetic insofar as it belongs to a community focused on the definitive kingdom. Contrary to Bultmann's position, however, this kingdom is tied to the historical Jesus, the Word made human being. Through his word and presence in the Church, this kingdom is already beginning to take

on shape in the course of history. In BECs the word is kerygmatic especially insofar as it calls for living commitment and a coherent response on both the individual and societal planes. Bultmann requires someone accredited to proclaim the kerygma. In BECs this accreditation is not primarily rooted in human wisdom or qualifications, though of course such factors are not ruled out. In BECs the crucial factor is the faith lived by the vast majority of the members in uprightness, simplicity, and poverty as they see their salvation and liberation in spirit and in truth.

5. All this is realized in BECs through the ongoing improving of *interpersonal relationships*, which give visibility to ecclesial community rooted in the prior communion in faith, justice, and love. In that sense community is not just the initiative of a God who summons and brings together. It is also the persevering laborious response of human beings journeying day by day through time and facing the problems and conflicts of life.

The limits and benefits of BECs vis-à-vis the word have been well brought out by Carlos Mesters, to whom they are indebted for a notable service of the word. Officially and scholarly accredited as a minister to proclaim the kerygma, he knew how to listen well to the word that God continues to utter in the hearts of the lowly, opening their hearts and minds to an understanding of both God and the human being. Mesters warns us about the risk of subjectivistic interpretation, about the failure to do a judicious, historically situated reading of the text, about the danger of a selective, ideological approach that seeks only confirmation of one's own initial position. He stresses the importance of a solid exegesis that will help the common people to get beyond those problems and also respond to the questions they themselves raise. He insists on the viability of a reading that will take into account the physical and material reality of the biblical folk without reducing the biblical message to just that. Finally, he tries to make it possible for an urban, industrial world to get closer to the rural book that the Bible is.⁹

Church As Servant

The ecclesiological models considered above are markedly centripetal. They prefer to focus on the internal reality of the Church, affirming its vitality and self-sufficiency in relation to the world. The Church teaches, offers a salvific presence, issues ethical norms, and enunciates values.

⁹ For the far from naive use of the Bible in BECs, see the article by Carlos Mesters in John Eagleson and Sergio Torres, eds., *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981). For a sample of his own ability to relate biblical exegesis to real human problems, see Carlos Mesters, *God, Where Are You? Meditations on the Old Testament* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1977).

The advent of modernity and the growing autonomy exercised by the world drew it further and further away from dependence on the Church and acceptance of it. The Church, in turn, reacted by taking up a defensive, indeed often aggressive, position vis-à-vis the world. Church and world took up hard lines in opposing trenches.¹⁰

Vatican II reversed this tendency. It led the Church to see the modern world as an interlocutor with its own identity. This focus can be described as a belatedly optimistic view of the world. Nevertheless, the Church continues to cherish the hope that it will be able to continue its mission vis-à-vis the world. That mission to the world will be one of service primarily. The important thing for the Church is not to withdraw into itself and attract a small group that keeps its distance from this world. Instead, it must take its rightful place in the world and then open itself up as a place for dialogue, constructive action, and liberation.

Paralleling the whole conciliar thrust in the Catholic Church, various theologies of secularization have taken shape in Protestant circles by stages. Their impact on the way to read world and Catholic theology was felt most keenly in the decade of the 1960s. The basically positive thrust of the process of secularization (taken as the human autonomy with regard to the explanation of the immanent reality) clearly took an increasingly immanentist turn, often enough degenerating into an undesirable secularism (which is the negation of any transcendent dimension or reality).

Despite some unacceptable turns and developments, the Western Church has clearly taken an uncontestable step in reformulating its own reality vis-à-vis the world. The disposition of the whole Church is one of universal service to humanity as such, which is now seen as one big family or indeed as the People of God. Service (*diakonia*) becomes the central inspiration of ecclesiology: Though very aware of its frailty and inconsistency, the Church will not retreat into itself. On the basis of its theological anthropology, it will offer the world answers that the world itself has not found, or that the world has missed and perverted in its dizzying drive toward immanentism and reductionism. This focus of the Church as servant is, however, still sharply confined. It was the theological perspective of the North and West immediately following Vatican II. Today, even in those hemispheres, it is being sharply contested, and its limitations are being recognized.

It is from different angles that the BECs translate and embody the new *diakonia* of the Church vis-à-vis the world. In Brazil and the rest of

¹⁰ See Marcello Azevedo, *Modernidade e Cristianismo* (S. Paulo: Loyola, 1981); *Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity* (Rome: Gregorian Univ., 1982); J. B. Libanio, *A volta a grande disciplina* (S. Paulo: Loyola, 1983).

Latin America, there can be no naively positive view of the modern world. The achievements of science and technology are admitted, and so is the heightened human awareness of such basic elements as human rights, individual freedom, participation in public life, recognition in principle of the equality of all human beings, and other features of modern contemporary culture. But it is impossible not to notice the gap between these theoretical ideals and their actual realization in history, not to mention the actual frustration and perversion of these ideals in many areas. Medellín and Puebla, as well as papal and episcopal postconciliar documents, underline the aberrations embodied in injustice, poverty, hunger, oppression, and structural stigmas that mar our reality. In such a context the poor are the ones who suffer most, along with those who are discriminated against and marginalized, crushed and destroyed beyond any hope of repair.

These are the people who predominantly make up the BECs. Hence this is the concrete way that the Church as BEC manifests its status as servant. In itself it again takes on and lives Christ the Servant: in the mission of the suffering people and in the witness it bears in faith, even to the full embodiment of the message in martyrdom. New life is thus given to a Christological component that has long been forgotten or left buried in obscurity. Here we have a Church that serves and fulfils itself in service to the world. It does this through the *diakonia* of a faith, conscious of the gift given to us in Jesus Christ. This gift is not, however, the privilege of a chosen few; it is the responsibility of all. This responsibility is lived in the urge to denounce and call into question the socio-structural organization that has produced such an unjust society. It does this by identifying clear-cut forms of institutionalized violence in all their shapes. It does this by insisting on radical changes through relations of communion and participation among human beings.

Moreover, in BECs the Church becomes a servant by serving the common people without replacing them in either the Church or the world in a paternalistic way. It recognizes that they too have the right to take the initiative in carrying through their own process of maturation and liberation, both religious and civil, after centuries of denial, tutelage, or marginalization. In this perspective of active ecclesial participation, BECs are a Church that eminently serves the other forms of being Church as well as the other vocations and charisms in the Church.¹¹

¹¹ This model, which stresses the urgent necessity of service as a consequence of faith, spells out the specific nature of Christian faith in full consistency with the tradition of ancient Israel and with the Gospel message. Both stressed the necessity of fleshing out in reality what one believed. Faith, then, cannot be understood solely in terms of assent or conviction; it must be translated into real-life action. There is a strong echo of the Gospel message (Mt 25 and Lk 10:25-37) in the insistence on a theology of service as an underlying

Church As Communion/Community

The model of Church as community founded on communion is the one that emanates most directly from the explicit ecclesiology of Vatican II. It stands in marked contrast to the hegemonic model (Church as institution) that was regarded as the primary interpretation of the mystery of the Church for ten centuries as least, and that was practically the dominant interpretation in the last five centuries. Nevertheless, the communitarian conception of the Church goes back to Scripture itself and was vigorously upheld in the patristic era. It threads through many phases of church history with regard to the ecclesial body as a whole and with regard to specific vocations within the Church, particularly in the evolution of the religious life. Thus in its ecclesiological perspective Vatican II taps roots grounded in tradition and the Bible and rediscovers one of the most fruitful facets of ecclesial inspiration throughout church history.¹²

Here the Church is the community that is established in communion with God and between human beings. It embraces and pervades the

part of an unmistakably Christian praxis. The term "praxis" is not synonymous with "practice" insofar as the latter term simply means action or behavior; nor is "praxis" the opposite of "theory." Praxis is a concrete form of historical commitment and involvement, stemming from a twofold awareness: that history is made in time and that it is the result of human actions stemming from concrete choices. Praxis, then, is the conscious making of history, and Christian praxis is the concrete living out of the historical dimensions of the faith. Christian praxis is the daily, long-term embodiment and direction given to the service that faith demands. See F. Taborda, "Fé cristã e práxis histórica," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 41 (1981) 250–78. This notion of praxis has been much discussed by various liberation theologians, including Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino. For a sophisticated and penetrating examination of the complexities of modern historical reality in the industrialized nations and Latin America, see chapters 10–13 of Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 249–340.

¹² See Pier Cesare Bori, *Koinonia: L'Idea della comunione nell'ecclesiologia recente e nel Nuovo Testamento* (Brescia: Paideia, 1972); id., *Chiesa primitiva: L'Immagine della comunità delle origini—Atti 2:42–47; 4:32–37—nella storia della chiesa antica* (Brescia: Paideia, 1974); Yves Congar, *L'Eglise de saint Augustin à l'époque moderne* (Paris: Cerf, 1970); Jérôme Hamer, *L'Eglise est une communion* (Paris: Cerf, 1962); Emil Brunner, *Das Missverständnis der Kirche* (Zurich: Zwingli, 1951); id., *Dogmatik 3: Die christliche Lehre von der Kirche, vom Glauben, und von der Vollendung* (Zurich: Zwingli, 1960). For Brunner, the Church is pure fraternal communion bearing witness to love. The antithesis between communion and institution is the core and guiding thread of his ecclesiology. In Dulles' first model (Church as institution), the Church stands above the faithful, as it were; it is extrinsic to them in a certain sense. In Church-as-communion ecclesiologies, the Church is the community of all the faithful living a life of communion. Bellarmine opposed institution to communion. Brunner opposes communion to institution. Hamer sees communion lived out only in the institution. BECs start from communion as experiential living in the light of faith to reflect consciously on their ecclesial participation in the Church as institution, which they would never imagine to be adequate without the living experience of communion.

People of God in the multiplicity of their gifts, vocations, services, and functions. It embraces the Church at every level, particularly in its appreciation of episcopal collegiality and local churches. It is no less open to other Christian denominations, non-Christian religions, and all human beings who sincerely search for love, truth, and justice. There have been frequent manifestations of this spirit, from the first encyclical of Paul VI (*Ecclesiam suam*) to the outlook underlying the basic structure of the new Code of Canon Law.

It might be assumed that all this was inspired and dictated merely by sociological imperatives. That is not the case. The People of God, the image of the Church most esteemed by Vatican II, is a great community; but it is so under the action of the Holy Spirit. The members of this People, who are seen in terms of equality, dignity, and freedom, receive the very same Spirit and act under that Spirit: hearing and proclaiming the word of God in the unity of the same faith and mission.

In this model of the Church as communion/community, both Medellín and Puebla will find their common basis and their great mediation for an evangelization that is humanizing, transforming, and liberating. The BEC is indicated as the primary and proper scenario for the concrete embodiment of this communion. Sociologically, it implements a new pattern of personal and social relationships. Ecclesiologically, it is a common center for reading and interpreting life and for hearing the word of God, for union among those who believe, and for service to all through the various ministries that arise out of the needs of the community and dovetail with its varied vocations and charisms. The BEC amalgamates and integrates the conscious, subsidiary coresponsibility of all, under the action of one and the same Spirit, into the total body of one and the same Church.

Here again we come across a central element that sheds light on the whole complex. These BECs have been in fact ecclesial communities of *poor people*, marked by a structural poverty stronger than the poor themselves. In a glaring way it bears witness to the absence of communion and solidarity between human beings in our current societies, to the prevailing power of injustice that destroys the human being and nullifies God's plan for humanity. Thus the BECs are a call to conversion of heart and to the re-establishment of justice in love, which will make possible communion in faith and mission. As a community that unites hearts, the BECs are no less a force for the transformation of a world that divides and crushes. They are insofar as they try to extend to the world and the Church the reality of communion that they themselves are already trying to live as communities. The little patch of the People of God that is living in each BEC, an "initial cell" as Medellín puts it, is a sign and

sacrament of the People of God that Vatican II sees as the Church, and that it would like to project over the world as a whole.

In BECs, then, the ecclesiological model of Church as communion/community ceases to be a theoretical variable of ecclesiological analysis. It becomes the existential witness to a reality of the Church, which is growing in communion and participation to become a community. In the BECs this model is a promising prototype of the necessary, ongoing process of historical becoming that is to culminate in the eschatological kingdom, where community is to be lived in full, definitive communion.

THE SOTERIOLOGICAL COMPONENT

In discussing these various ecclesiological models, I mentioned several times their underlying Christological component. I do not want to end this article without also alluding briefly to the importance of the soteriological conception these models may derive from their association with BECs as a way of being Church. The mystery of the Church is intimately bound up with the mystery of Jesus Christ, and no less with the understanding of his mission. This, in turn, is reflected in the conception of the ecclesial mission. Thus ecclesiology, Christology, and soteriology shed light on one another and help to explain one another. The salvation and redemption given to us by the Father in and through Jesus Christ (the meaning of his life and mission) is to be realized on at least three levels. They can be distinguished from one another analytically, but they are interwoven in reality. For the historical destiny of humanity must be oriented in line with its eschatological destiny, in the indissoluble unity of the proclamation and realization of the kingdom, which is to be initiated here but find its ultimate culmination only in the eschaton.

The first level is the redeeming and saving liberation from sin that marks the human race as a whole and the individual human person. The second level has to do with sin in terms of its interpersonal and social projections, insofar as it expresses the perversion of God's plan as manifested in the concrete human organization of social, economic, and political realities that have been created by human beings and that affect humanity. The third level has to do with liberation from sin as the latter is incorporated into the gestation of culture and history over centuries, which in turn is often the wellspring of sin on the two other levels and vice versa. These three levels of salvation, redemption, and liberation are a replica of God's activity with the people of Israel, hence of the history of our salvation as designed by God.

Salvation, redemption, or liberation cannot be understood solely from the divine side, i.e., as our ransom from sin through God's initiative and His new openness to a covenant of love with human beings in and

through Jesus Christ. Neither can it be understood solely in a directly anthropological sense that is not sufficiently existential, i.e., salvation as the fulness of human liberty and total opening up to the absolute, as a teleological orientation to the definitive, eschatological future of humanity. Salvation, redemption, and liberation must further be understood as the Pauline exigency that human beings also respond to, and ally themselves with, God and His project to liberate humanity with respect to the consequences of sin (Romans 2 and 7). Throughout history those consequences leave their mark not only on the life of the individual but also, and even more so, on the social context of the world.

In the BECs we do find the soteriological key of the various ecclesiological models mentioned, a key that tends to stress the first level of redemption just noted. But everything I have been saying about the BECs with respect to the ecclesiological dimension of these models implies a twofold emphasis in the soteriological perspective, which is paramount in the ecclesial awareness of our day. The first says that human beings are, by the saving power of Jesus Christ, an active party in carrying on the process of salvation and liberation in history. Just as they were agents in the deformation of God's plan through their human sin, so they express the new life given to them in Jesus Christ through their real-life embodiment of the love and justice that he has re-established. It is the realization of the Word, made Salvation: a biblical exigency throughout the two Testaments. A second emphasis is also affirmed in the BECs, communities of poor people. They see themselves as the primary subjects in setting in motion and actuating this process of realizing salvation through the transformation of sin's consequences. In fact, they are the real-life victims of injustice-made sin in the world in which we live. Hence it is they who can best perceive the rupture between such injustice and God's project. To be or become poor is to perceive this from the standpoint and condition of the poor whatever our social and economic condition might be. Here is picked up the primary inspiration of Jesus' own life and mission (Lk 3:18-21), which must necessarily be reaffirmed in the life and mission of the Church.¹³

¹³ In a forthcoming book, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil*, which is to be published in English by Georgetown University Press, I examine the origin and formation of Brazilian BECs, their evangelizing potential, and the rich novelty of their pastoral paradigm. I also explore them as a theological topic, and the challenges they may pose to the overall process of evangelization. A Portuguese version of the present article is being published by the Brazilian journal *Perspectiva teológica* (Sept.-Dec. 1985).