

THE RECEPTION OF VATICAN II IN LATIN AMERICA

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Since Vatican II the Latin American church has come of age to become an autochthonous and distinctive expression of the universal church. The article enlists the postconciliar general conferences of Latin American bishops to explore the creative reception of the council and how it has shaped the identity and mission of this church. Three theological elements reflect the renewal that Vatican II made possible in the Latin American church: reading the signs of the times, the preferential option for the poor, and the communion ecclesiology expressed in the Christian Base Communities.

IN THE EARLY 1960s, the Latin American church, due to demographic, social, economic, and political changes, was ripe for change and renewal. But the Second Vatican Council provided the catalyst for the development of a truly autochthonous church. While the council did not directly address the concerns of the Latin American continent, it did chart a new course for its church. The Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, which gathered at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, formally began the process of reception, whereby the Latin American church began to appropriate the resolutions arrived at by Vatican II a few years earlier.¹

This article does not focus on liturgy, religious life, or other topics directly addressed by the council, but rather on how the council helped shape the identity and mission of the Latin American church. It is possible to summarize the council's contribution to the Latin American church by using three theological principles that have come to characterize it: (1)

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¹ Differences among Latin American countries must be acknowledged, as generalizations about the whole continent are always vulnerable to inaccuracies. Yet, I believe that some generalizations are legitimate, given the fact that most countries of Latin America share a similar faith, history, culture, and language.

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attention to the signs of the times as the point of departure for pastoral directives and theological reflection; (2) the adoption of the preferential option for the poor as the stance that ought to inform all aspects of the church; and (3) an ecclesiological vision rooted in the idea of communion and expressed in the formation of Christian base communities. These three elements have been consistently engaged across the general conferences of Latin American bishops since Vatican II. Thus, following a discussion of the council from the Latin American perspective, this article focuses on the development of these principles at the episcopal gatherings held at Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992), and Aparecida (2007).

This focus on the general conferences of bishops as key agents and indicators of reception is justified by three considerations: (1) the participating bishops represented all the national episcopal conferences in Latin America and the Caribbean; (2) the general conferences explicitly placed themselves in the trajectory of Vatican II; and (3) the general conferences, which usually take place every ten years, set the pastoral directives for the whole continent in light of the challenges experienced by the church. I engage each general conference as an event constituted by many elements in order to illustrate the different forces that converged in the formulation of its final documents.²

VATICAN II FROM A LATIN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

Although Vatican II was, as Karl Rahner famously argued, a gathering of the “world church,” including 600 bishops from Latin America, it is important to keep in mind that the council was an event driven primarily by the concerns of the European church.³ European bishops led the theological and pastoral discussions during the assemblies, and “very little if anything referring directly to Latin America found its way into the final document of the Council.”⁴

² It is important to distinguish a “National Conference of Bishops,” which refers to a permanent episcopal structure of a particular nation (e.g., The National Conference of Bishops of Brazil), from a “Regional Conference of Bishops,” which clusters the bishops of nations in close proximity to one another (e.g., the Episcopal Secretariat of Central America and Panama), and the “General Conferences of Latin American Bishops” (e.g., The Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín), which are events that include representative bishops from Latin America and the Caribbean.

³ See Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican Council II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 716–27, at 718; Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist, 2012) 3; and José Comblin, “Vaticano II: Cincuenta años después,” *Revista latinoamericana de teología* 84 (2011) 271–72.

⁴ Enrique Dussel, “Latin America,” in *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, ed. Adrian Hastings (New York: Oxford University, 1991) 319–25, at 319.

This subordination of the needs of the Latin American church to the concerns of the European church has historical roots. The Latin American church of the mid-20th century was in many ways still a European transplant, its identity shaped by its historic and institutional ties to the Spanish and Portuguese colonial powers. These connections contributed to the church's later tendency to oppose independence movements during the 19th century, even as it was strengthening its ties to groups representing the traditional alliance of "conservative parties, landowners, and the old aristocracy."⁵ Indeed, until the mid-20th century the church honored this alliance and tacitly endorsed the socioeconomic structures that relegated the majority of the population to substandard living conditions.⁶

After World War II, however, the continent experienced a demographic explosion that accelerated internal migration among the rural poor, who sought better living conditions in urban areas. The rapid shift of population from the countryside to the slums surrounding the cities made it hard to overlook the acute economic inequality and poverty of much of the population. Alarmed by these injustices, many Catholics and non-Catholics struggled to respond to the situation of the whole continent.⁷ Their efforts took the form of movements that sought to change not only the broader society but also the church's priorities and alliances. These renewal movements would give direction to the Latin American church's reception of Vatican II.

Lay movements such as Catholic Action, *Cursillos de Cristiandad*, and the Legionaries of Mary, which had come from Europe earlier in the century, stressed the active role of lay people in the world and expanded at an exponential rate.⁸ Catholic Action, arguably the largest and most influential among these groups, stimulated the formation of labor unions as well as professional and student organizations, and eventually inspired the formation of Christian Democratic parties. Although these movements did not call for the structural transformation of society per se, by inculcating Christian social values in their members they encouraged sectors of the church to make a more radical commitment to alleviate poverty.

⁵ Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) 13.

⁶ This is not to deny that the church was in some ways an advocate for the poor, but the church did not identify herself with the great majority of the Christian faithful or recognize their concerns as her own.

⁷ See Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492–1979)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981) 101–24; Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology* 71–121.

⁸ See Dussel, *History of the Church in Latin America* 101–24.

Another important lay movement was the formation of *comunidades eclesiales de base*, the base ecclesial communities (CEBs). These grew from a successful catechetical experiment initiated in 1956 at Barra do Pirai, Brazil. In an effort to overcome the shortage of priests in rural areas, lay members were trained to serve as catechists, animators, and leaders of small communities. These lay-led Christian communities anticipated the important responsibilities that Vatican II and Medellín would later ascribe to the laity, and the CEBs would eventually play a crucial role in the development of an indigenous Latin American church.⁹

The shortage of priests in rural areas also led to an influx of North American and European clergy during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰ These missionaries introduced new European currents of theological thought, such as the *nouvelle théologie*, thus bridging the distance between Latin American communities and those of the First World. At the same time, other intellectual and historical developments sharpened the Latin American church's awareness of the distinctive challenges it faced: local scholars achieved an understanding of the causes of poverty in the region that challenged explanations put forward by scholars from industrialized nations, and this new understanding would later inform the discussions at the general conferences held after Vatican II. The Cuban Revolution, however ambivalent its legacy, at the time inspired many emancipatory movements elsewhere on the continent, while the liberation of many African nations from their colonial ties made the Western world more aware of the ubiquity of oppression and raised, in the developing nations, the hope for liberation.

The Latin American church's increasing awareness of itself as a distinct branch of the global church was fostered by the establishment in 1955 of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in Rio de Janeiro.¹¹ This first general conference of bishops did not publish any significant documents

⁹ The terms "base ecclesial community," "Christian base community," and *comunidad eclesial de base* (CEB) are used interchangeably. On the origins of these communities, see Marcello de C. Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church*, trans. John Drury (Washington: Georgetown University, 1987); and Andrew Dawson, "The Origins and Character of the Base Ecclesial Community: A Brazilian Perspective," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (New York: Cambridge University, 2007) 139–58.

¹⁰ See Renato Poblete, "The Church in Latin America: A Historical Survey," in *The Church and Social Change in Latin America*, ed. Henry A. Landsberger (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1970) 39–52.

¹¹ The first conference of Latin American bishops, the Plenary Council of Latin America, was convoked by Pope Leo XIII in Rome in 1889, but it did not constitute a regional body.

and is scarcely mentioned in the history of the Latin American church.¹² Yet, within a relatively brief time, CELAM broke down the isolation that had hampered relationships among bishops and would eventually lead the effort to appropriate Vatican II faithfully and creatively. The episcopal council would become, in Enrique Dussel's words, "the only effective entity operating as a united force in Latin America, promoting integration in the programs of the political parties and diverse lay movements in general."¹³

Thus, when the 600 Latin American bishops arrived in Rome, they saw themselves as representing the distinctive political and economic concerns of the continent. Although their overall participation is often described as limited, these bishops sought to convey the reality of global poverty to their colleagues both in formal discussions and in the corridors outside the *aula* of the council.¹⁴ Their concerns resonated with European bishops, but there were notable differences between the Latin American and European views of the role the church should play in responding to such needs. Panamanian bishop Marcos McGrath recounts that during the discussions around *Gaudium et spes*, some European bishops were very anxious to note that the church was not directly responsible for building the temporal order. While agreeing with this basic principle, McGrath and other Latin American bishops objected to the way it was phrased and sought to make room for the church's participation in society. McGrath writes:

We did not want to give the impression in a Council statement that the church, as an institution, could not and must not in any instance inaugurate programs and instill in the people the spirit of working together for justice, a spirit which is required if they are going to raise themselves up by their own bootstraps and develop organic communities.¹⁵

Prior to the opening of the council, Pope John XXIII asked the assembled bishops to engage three key issues: (1) updating the church in relation to the modern world; (2) overcoming division among Christians; and (3) addressing the challenge that the poverty of underdeveloped countries posed for the church.¹⁶ The question of the church's response to modernity

¹² Segundo Galilea notes that this first conference had a minimal impact because "as yet there were few established channels in the continent to spread its message" ("Between Medellín and Puebla," *Cross Currents* 28 [1978] 71–78, at 71).

¹³ Dussel, *History of the Church in Latin America* 134.

¹⁴ Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology* 97–98.

¹⁵ McGrath, "Church Doctrine in Latin America after the Council" 111.

¹⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Church and the Poor: A Latin American Perspective," in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1987) 175.

received the broadest attention, and the council went to great lengths to foster ecumenical dialogue. But with the exception of a few texts, including the fine christological passages in *Lumen gentium* no. 8 and *Ad gentes* no. 5, the relationship between the church and the poor was given little prominence in the council's documents. This modest response to the problem of poverty is not difficult to explain. The majority of the council's participants represented European and North American sees and had little knowledge of the problems of the underdeveloped nations. They focused instead on the challenges of modernity and ecumenism they themselves faced.¹⁷

If Vatican II sidestepped the economic challenges facing the Latin American church, the council nevertheless equipped that church with the tools required to confront them. The council's renewed attention to the historical dimension of the church, along with a corresponding change in attitude toward the modern world, would provide a crucial methodological framework for the church in Latin America. The opening lines of *Gaudium et spes* state that the church "realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds" (no. 2).¹⁸ This attention to history was expressed in a scriptural image that would become a guiding principle in the Latin American reception of the council: discerning the signs of the times. The call to heed the signs of the times was already present in John XXIII's convocation of the council, and it was further articulated in the council's documents (nos. 4, 11).¹⁹ In these texts the church embraces her place within history and acknowledges her dialogical relationship with a historical world. In attending to the signs of the times, the church inductively determines from everyday facts the signs of consistency between the Christian tradition and the desires of human beings. The signs, then, "call for the positive acknowledgement of history as an authentic 'place' wherein the imminent presence of the kingdom may be perceived."²⁰

The Latin American church quickly discerned that there was one historical sign of the presence of God that overshadowed all others and required her immediate attention. A few years after the council, Gustavo Gutiérrez referred to this sign as the "irruption of the poor," which gave rise to his central theological question: "How is it possible to tell the poor, who are

¹⁷ Gutiérrez, "The Church and the Poor" 183–88.

¹⁸ All references to the documents of Vatican II come from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996). I use gender-inclusive language except for when directly quoting church documents.

¹⁹ John XXIII, *Humanae salutis*, Apostolic Constitution, December 25, 1961, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/apost_constitutions/1961/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apc_19611225_humanae-salutis_sp.html (all URLs cited herein were accessed on September 5, 2012).

²⁰ Giuseppe Ruggiere, "Faith and History," in *Reception of Vatican II* 91–114, at 98.

forced to live in conditions that embody a denial of love, that God loves them?”²¹ Leonardo Boff approached the issue from a different direction, asking, “What does it mean to be Christian in a world of the oppressed?”²² And Jon Sobrino, following Ignacio Ellacuría, explicitly asserts “that the sign of the times . . . par excellence, is the ‘existence of a crucified people’ . . . and that the prime demand on us is that we ‘take them from the cross.’”²³ In heeding Vatican II’s call to discern the signs of the times, the Latin American church encounters the poor—the crucified—and in solidarity with them recognizes the stance that still guides its liberating mission: the church’s preferential option for the poor.

FROM VATICAN II TO MEDELLÍN (1968)

Even before Pope Paul VI delivered the concluding address of Vatican II on December 8, 1965, preparations had already begun for the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin American Bishops, who would assemble in Medellín, Colombia. Brazilian church historian José Oscar Beozzo convincingly argued that the initial incentive for the conference at Medellín was the bishops’ realization that many of their concerns would not be addressed by the council.²⁴ Hence, during the last session of the council in 1965, Chilean bishop Manuel Larraín, president of CELAM at the time, and his vice-president, Brazilian bishop Hélder Câmara, decided that an assembly of Latin American bishops was needed to examine the continent’s situation in light of Vatican II. Taking advantage of a CELAM meeting in Rome later that year, the contingent of Latin American bishops officially proposed such a gathering to Paul VI, who approvingly suggested a wider consultation among the bishops on the continent. Three years later, in January 1968, the pope officially convoked the conference at Medellín.²⁵

Since the late 1950s, converging historical and ideological forces had inspired in many Latin Americans the desire to transform the dismal reality in which they lived. The popular movements that began to develop in the early 1960s confronted new military dictatorships that began to take power in the middle of the same decade. Military repression only aggravated a restless population and

²¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) xxxiv.

²² Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 10.

²³ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) vii.

²⁴ José Oscar Beozzo, “Medellín: Inspiração e raízes,” August 31, 1998, <http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/202.htm>.

²⁵ Fernando Torres Londoño, “Medellín 1968,” *Revista anuario de historia de la iglesia* 5 (1996) 416–17.

stirred their hope for change. Published in 1967, a year before Medellín, Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum progressio* also helped foster a climate of high expectations for the conference.²⁶ The pope's analysis of the inequalities resulting from the international economic order anticipated many of the themes articulated at Medellín.²⁷ Gutiérrez notes that the encyclical also had a significant influence on the overall soteriological vision of Latin American theologians because it stressed salvation as a holistic event that incorporates the personal, social, and spiritual dimensions of the human person.²⁸ On a continent where the majority of the population was culturally and sociologically Catholic, the urgent desire for social change went hand in hand with the need for a renewed understanding of how the church should relate to the social sphere.²⁹

In the years between Vatican II and Medellín, CELAM organized a number of regional meetings to examine and discuss "the signs of the times in Latin America and their interpretation for the theological and pastoral mission of [the] Church."³⁰ In these preparatory consultations, the participating bishops were joined by experts, including economists, anthropologists, sociologists, and theologians, who presented papers (*ponencias*) on their areas of specialization. These presentations widened the bishops' horizons and equipped them to better articulate the church's evangelizing mission in Latin America.³¹ Among the meetings, those held in Melgar, Colombia, and Itapoán, Brazil, in 1968 are particularly noteworthy.³²

²⁶ Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology* 126. See also Edward L. Cleary, *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985) 40.

²⁷ *Populorum progressio* became an important source for the final Medellín documents; it was quoted more than 30 times.

²⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Meaning and Scope of Medellín," in *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) 59–101, at 74.

²⁹ Segundo Galilea, "Latin America in the Medellín and Puebla Conferences: An Example of Selective and Creative Reception of Vatican II," in *Reception of Vatican II* 59–73, at 60.

³⁰ Marcos McGrath, "The Impact of *Gaudium et Spes*: Medellín, Puebla, and Pastoral Creativity," in *The Church and Culture since Vatican II: The Experience of North and Latin America*, ed. Joseph Gremillion (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1985) 61–73, at 67.

³¹ *Ibid.* 66. See also Cleary, *Crisis and Change* 34–35.

³² In addition to these meetings at Melgar and Itapoán, in 1966 the bishops gathered in Baños, Ecuador, to discuss pastoral ministry, social action, and the laity. In Mar del Plata that same year, the gathering focused on development and integration in Latin America; the 1968 meeting in Buga, Colombia, addressed the mission of Catholic universities in Latin America. See Agenor Brighenti, "América Latina—Medellín: 40 Años," *Adital*, <http://www.adital.com.br/site/noticia.asp?lang=ES&cod=34474>.

Melgar's recognition of Christ's active presence in history would become a key feature of Medellín's theology of revelation. It explicitly rejected the existence of two different histories—one sacred and the other profane. To the contrary, Melgar insisted on the fundamental unity of history in which God and humans participate. Christ's salvific work encompasses all the dimensions of human history and sets the mission for a church squarely planted in this same history. The document from the meeting states:

All the dynamism of the cosmos and of human history; the movement for the creation of a more just and fraternal world, for the overcoming of social inequalities among people from all that depersonalizes them . . . have their origin, are transformed, and are perfected in the salvific work of Christ. In him and through him salvation is present in the heart of human history, and in the final analysis, every human act is defined by that salvation.³³

At Itapoán, meanwhile, the Latin American bishops began to distance themselves from the social reformism of Vatican II and the models of economic development proposed by the industrialized nations. They instead invoked the dependency theory that had been formulated by Latin American social scientists in the mid-1960s. This theory essentially argues that the wealth enjoyed by developed countries is made possible by the poverty of the underdeveloped ones. As the Brazilian economist Theotonio Dos Santos summarizes, "Dependency is a situation in which certain groups of countries have their economies conditioned by the development and expansion of another country's economy."³⁴ Although this socioeconomic theory is rightly criticized for not sufficiently accounting for the internal factors that foster dependency within the underdeveloped nations, it made clear the need for a global and historical approach that would incorporate structural analysis into its examination of Latin America's underdevelopment.³⁵

The period just prior to the Medellín conference saw an intensification of the fundamental concern that had informed the two-year-long process of preparation: how best to proclaim the gospel on the continent. The preparatory document for the conference stated the problem concisely: "Free of temporal partnerships, which she rejects; free from the burden of ambiguous prestige, which does not serve her interests, the Church seeks to understand a new evangelization of the continent."³⁶ The document called the

³³ CELAM Department of Mission, Melgar meeting, quoted in Gutiérrez, "The Meaning and Scope of Medellín" 81.

³⁴ Theotonio Dos Santos, "La crisis de la teoría del desarrollo y la relaciones de dependencia en América Latina," quoted in Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology* 145.

³⁵ Gutiérrez, "Meaning and Scope of Medellín" 77.

³⁶ *Signos de renovación* 215 (my translation); quoted in Gutiérrez, "Meaning and Scope of Medellín" 78.

Latin American church to a deeper conversion in order to more credibly proclaim the word. She was to place herself at the service of all and break with the ambiguous legacy of her legitimization of the political and economic domination exercised by both colonial rulers and local oligarchies.

On August 24, 1968, Paul VI—the first pope to visit the Americas—delivered the opening address of the general conference.³⁷ The 249 participants aimed to articulate an interpretation of the church's mission that would reshape the identity of the Latin American church. The introduction to the final documents shows that the bishops were mindful of the historical significance of the occasion: "We are on the threshold of a new epoch in the history of our continent. It appears to be a time full of zeal for full emancipation, of liberation from every form of servitude, of personal maturity and collective integration. In these signs we perceive the first indications of the painful birth of a new civilization."³⁸

The direction of the conference was set early on with a sociological overview and the presentation of seven papers (*ponencias*) that addressed the social and religious situation of the continent.³⁹ Speaking on "Signs of the Times in Latin America Today," Bishop Marcos McGrath of Panama called the assembly to interpret these signs for the mission of the local church.⁴⁰ The "see, judge, act" approach to reading the signs, popularized by the Belgian priest Joseph Cardijn, called for looking at reality through the appropriate scientific disciplines; judging the results in the light of Christian revelation—that is, through theological reflection; and acting or responding through the implementation of pastoral recommendations. This inductive process guided the final drafting of the conference's final document.

Latin American theologians often assert that the strength of the Medellín conference resides in its "creative and selective reception" of Vatican II.⁴¹ What they mean by "selective" and "creative" can be inferred from the official formulation that articulates the theme of the conference

³⁷ In *Aparecida renacer de una esperanza* (San José: Fundación Amerindia/ Indo-American, 2007) 35–52, at 40. See also <http://www.scribd.com/doc/40528082/Amerindia-2007-Aparecida-Renacer-de-Una-Esperanza>.

³⁸ Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, "Introduction to Final Documents," in *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*, 2 vols. (Bogotá: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970) 2: no. 4.

³⁹ See Cleary, *Crisis and Change* 41.

⁴⁰ Marcos McGrath, "The Signs of the Times in Latin America Today," in *Church in the Present-Day Transformation* 1:81–106.

⁴¹ See Brighenti, "America Latina—Medellín: 40 Años; see also Segundo Galilea, "Latin America in the Medellín and Puebla Conferences: An Example of Selective and Creative Reception of Vatican II," in *Reception of Vatican II* 59–73, at 61.

in its final document, “The Church in the Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council.” This church “reflected on itself both ‘in the light of the council’ and in the context of ‘the present day transformation of Latin America.’”⁴² It is this contextualization of Vatican II in contemporary Latin America that characterizes its creative reception by the Medellín conference. The bishops “incarnated” the insights of the council in a way that would empower the local Latin American church to become an evangelizing force in the dynamic transformation of its own culture and society. Their indebtedness to Vatican II is always palpable: “Of 340 references which Medellín makes, 219 are from the Council.”⁴³ At the same time, Medellín’s reception of the council was selective: the bishops had to analyze and interpret the continent’s current economic, political, and cultural developments in order to discern the issues that demanded their immediate attention. They determined that the most important and pressing historical signs were overwhelming poverty and injustice.⁴⁴ Other issues of import to the council, such as secularism and religious pluralism, would be addressed more fully in later conferences. In this sense, Medellín was a hermeneutical accomplishment that brought together text and context—the good news and a particular situation—in such a way that each interprets and illuminates the other.⁴⁵

The bishops’ analysis of the signs of the times—Latin American realities and the experience of the poor—marked Medellín’s point of departure in formulating the church’s vision and mission. The conference took an honest view of the people’s situation, describing it as “dismal poverty, which in many cases becomes inhuman wretchedness” that is accompanied by a “deafening cry from the throats of millions of men asking their pastors for liberation” (Medellín, “Poverty,” nos.1, 2).⁴⁶ This description of the situation was complemented by a vigorous attempt to identify its underlying causes. Medellín’s inductive approach to the continent’s social reality incorporated the expertise of different social scientists and appealed to the theory of dependency and other structural analyses (Medellín, “Peace,”

⁴² Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Local Realization of the Church,” in *Reception of Vatican II* 77–90, at 82.

⁴³ McGrath, “Impact of *Gaudium et Spes*” 67; 47 references come from *Gaudium et spes*, 28 from *Lumen gentium*.

⁴⁴ The bishops explicitly acknowledge that “‘the signs of the time,’ . . . on our continent are expressed *above all else* in the social order” (Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, “Pastoral Concern for the Elites,” in *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America* 2:no. 13, emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Komonchak, “Local Realization of the Church” 83.

⁴⁶ These and all direct references to the text of the Medellín Conference are taken from *Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America*, vol. 2.

nos. 3, 5, and 9). This careful attention to the situation of the human person was also present in the conference's treatment of other areas, such as education, preaching, catechesis, liturgy, and other ministries.⁴⁷ In the reception of Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum concilium*, for instance, Medellín insists that "In Latin America . . . the liturgical celebration crowns and implies a commitment to the human situation, to development and human promotion" (Medellín, "Liturgy" no. 4).

The bishops fiercely denounced the extreme inequality among social classes, the forms of oppression exercised by the dominant groups, and the unjust actions of world powers. Indeed, their pronouncements against injustice go beyond ethical condemnation: they raise this historical reality to the status of a theological concept by declaring it to be a situation of sin, contrary to God's will (Medellín, "Peace" no. 1). As one author notes, the bishops put forward "the first magisterial articulation of structural and institutional sin."⁴⁸

The church's faithful observance of the signs of the times led her directly to the concept of the preferential option for the poor,⁴⁹ itself a development of the position of John XXIII, who envisioned the church of Christ to be a "church of the poor."⁵⁰ The bishops at Medellín asserted that "the Church in Latin America should be manifested, in an increasingly clear manner, as truly poor, missionary, and paschal, separate from all temporal power and courageously committed to the liberation of each and every man" (Medellín, "Youth" no. 15). Their application of the pope's insight to the context of Latin America is rooted in faith in a God who incarnates in history—who himself becomes poor in order to extend his friendship to us. In a similar vein, for Medellín, the church's solidarity with the poor "is directed to the fulfillment of the redeeming mission to which it is committed by Christ" (Medellín, "Poverty" no. 7). Hence, the conference clearly understood that the church's solidarity with the poor is at the center of her vocation to follow Christ and serve as he did (Medellín, "Poverty" nos. 4, 6, and 7). Speaking of this solidarity with the poor, Clodovis Boff somewhat dramatically notes, "Everything happened as if Providence had reserved

⁴⁷ Galilea makes a similar point; see "Latin America in the Medellín and Puebla Conferences" 63.

⁴⁸ Daniel J. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* (2010), <http://catholicethics.com/sites/default/files/u3/Daly%20article.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Although the formula is not explicitly stated in Medellín, we already find here the foundations of the church's "preferential option for the poor." The formula would be articulated explicitly later in the conference at Puebla and in liberation theology.

⁵⁰ John XXIII, message of September 11, 1962, in Angelina and Giuseppe Alberigo, *Giovanni XXIII: Profezia nella fedeltà* (Brescia: Queriniana) 365, quoted in Gutiérrez, "Meaning and Scope of Medellín" 67.

for the Latin American Church the task of developing, on behalf of the universal Church, what Vatican II had only intuited. And this is perhaps the most creative element of reception of the Council by the Church of the Continent.”⁵¹

Closely related to the church’s preferential option for the poor is her message of integral liberation. Building on *Gaudium et spes* and *Populorum progressio*, but speaking with more precision of the fundamental unity of history and an understanding of salvation that encompasses all aspects of the human person, the Latin American bishops affirmed that “while avoiding confusion or simplistic identification, [catechetical teaching] must always make clear the profound unity that exists between God’s plan of salvation realized in Christ and the aspirations of man; between the history of salvation and human history” (Medellín, “Catechesis” no. 4). Upholding a holistic soteriology, the bishops noted that “Christians cannot but acknowledge the presence of God, who desires to save the whole man, body and soul” (Medellín, “Introduction” no. 5).⁵²

Consideration of the church as a mystery in which all the people of God are invited to participate enabled Vatican II to conceive of the church as a communion whose charisms and ministries are oriented toward the edification of the community.⁵³ The council proclaimed that “[the] Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament” (*Lumen gentium* no. 26). Medellín echoed this insight:

The Church is, above all, a mystery of catholic communion, because in the heart of its visible community, by the call of the Word of God and through the grace of its sacraments, particularly in the Eucharist, all men can participate in the common dignity of the sons of God, and also share in the responsibility and the work to carry out the common mission of bearing witness to the God Who saved them and made them brothers in Christ (Medellín, “Joint Pastoral Planning” no. 6).

As José Comblin has noted, “the concept ‘people of God’ offered the gateway to a church of the poor.”⁵⁴ Indeed, Vatican II’s communion model of church was creatively expressed in Latin America’s CEBs. Before Medellín these communities, usually constituted by poor people, existed largely as

⁵¹ Clodovis Boff, “La originalidad histórica de Medellín,” *Revista electrónica latinoamericana de teología*, <http://servicioskoinonia.org/relat/203.htm> (my translation).

⁵² Here, the words of *Gaudium et spes* no. 39 are a helpful reminder: “While earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God.”

⁵³ Consuelo Velez, “Verdaderas luces y urgentes desafíos,” *Voices* 4 (2011) 273–83, at 276; <http://internationaltheologicalcommission.org/VOICES/VOICES-2011-4.pdf>.

⁵⁴ José Comblin, *People of God*, ed. and trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 41.

scattered groups, but the conference outlined their central identifying features and treated them as an official expression of the renewed Latin American church.⁵⁵ Medellín recognized the CEBs' role as protagonists in the renewal of the Latin American church and thus considered them to be the "initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures" as well as "the focus of evangelization . . . and the most important source of human advancement and development" (Medellín, "Joint Pastoral Planning" no. 10).

While the conference ascribed responsibility for the selection and formation of community leaders to the parish priests and bishops, it also noted that the leaders of CEBs could be ordained, religious, or lay ministers (Medellín, "Joint Pastoral Planning" no. 11). Thus, the Christian communities introduced a new church structure in which the laity could participate while exercising a measure of authority. After Medellín the CEBs spread throughout Latin America, spearheading the Bible-reading movement and nurturing reflections that would strengthen the development of Latin American liberation theology. Ten years after Medellín, Galilea noted that Latin America's evangelization could not be understood in the context of justice and liberation alone; it had to be understood in the context of the CEBs. "These communities embody the originality of the Latin American Church," he wrote. "They represent one typical way in which Latin American Christians are trying to preach the gospel and assemble as church. Indeed, they offer a new 'model of the church.'"⁵⁶

The reception of Vatican II by the Second Episcopal Conference at Medellín set the course the Latin American church has followed to this day. In spite of the struggles and conflicts that Medellín would generate, many Latin Americans continue to see Medellín as a true rebirth and a new Pentecost for the Latin American church. In the words of Chilean theologian Víctor Codina, "Medellín became the point of departure in [Latin Americans'] march as a people of God . . . [and] has become the necessary test and point of reference to discern the path of the Latin American church for years to come."⁵⁷

FROM MEDELLÍN TO PUEBLA (1979)

Medellín provided Latin Americans with the foundation to develop as an autochthonous and renewed church. Ten years later, the general conference

⁵⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, "The Ecclesiologies of Medellín and the Lessons of the Base Communities," *Cross Currents* 44 (1994) 67–84, at 74.

⁵⁶ Segundo Galilea, "Between Medellín and Puebla," *Cross Currents* 28 (1978) 71–78, at 75.

⁵⁷ Víctor Codina, "Eclesiología de Aparecida," in *Aparecida: Renacer de una esperanza* 105–25, at 109 (my translation).

held in Puebla, Mexico, “shows decisively that the spirit of both Medellín and Vatican II is still very much alive within the Roman Catholic Church.”⁵⁸ At Puebla the three central theological elements of Medellín that came to define the post-Vatican II Latin American church—attention to the signs of the times, the preferential option for the poor, and a communion ecclesiology expressed in the Christian base communities—would be confirmed, clarified, and further developed. In a different historical and ecclesial context than Medellín, Puebla represents a new stage in the selective and creative reception of the council.

The decade between the Medellín and Puebla conferences saw vast political and social deterioration throughout the continent. In 1978, the Theological Commission of Northeast Brazil observed, “If the Church were to summarize the past decade of ‘development’ in Latin America, it would have to state that the result is more hunger.”⁵⁹ Medellín had spurred the development of well-considered pastoral programs and training institutes and the unprecedented growth of CEBs and groups actively engaged in civil society, fostering the urgent sense that society had to be transformed. As the theologian Pablo Richard observed, “The Church now has a full-blown popular movement with its own theological thought commonly known as liberation theology.”⁶⁰ On the other hand, the increased social deterioration in many Latin American nations gave rise to widespread political unrest. At a time when most of the continent was still under military dictatorship, unrest led to human rights abuses and the targeting of those who opposed the current regimes. The church began to experience, in the persecution of some of her lay and ordained members, the cost of the option for the poor exercised at Medellín.

Puebla also needs to be understood within its particular ecclesial context. In the years prior to the conference, a growing division had emerged among the Latin American bishops. While the final documents of the Medellín conference had been approved overwhelmingly (only five negative votes out of 130), a number of bishops were now questioning what the future direction of the church should be in her relationship to society.⁶¹ Two distinct pastoral tendencies became clear. In line with Medellín, some bishops insisted that the main challenges before the church remained the realities of poverty and injustice. An influential minority, however, argued that the main challenge now was the continent’s increasing secularism and a

⁵⁸ Jon Sobrino, “The Significance of Puebla for the Catholic Church in Latin America,” in *Puebla and Beyond*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980) 289–309, at 302.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Penny Lernoux, “The Long Path to Puebla,” in *Puebla and Beyond* 3–25, at 25.

⁶⁰ Pablo Richard, “Puebla: Hope of the Poor,” *Missiology* 7.3 (1979) 287–93, at 288.

⁶¹ Cleary, *Crisis and Change* 44.

corresponding weakening of the faith.⁶² This camp argued that “Liberation without evangelization [is] the breach through which secularism penetrates,” and thus Puebla should make evangelization its main concern.⁶³

Meanwhile, in the public square, Catholics were embroiled in disagreements over the church’s proper role vis-à-vis the political sphere. While the Medellín conference had insisted on the need to humanize and transform society through peaceful means and did not endorse any particular social or political agenda, the acute deterioration of the social and political situation influenced Catholic groups to take more radical and revolutionary positions.⁶⁴ Moreover, liberation theology, which had gained strength during Medellín and flourished thereafter, became both a source and symbol of conflict on the continent.

The mistrust of liberation theology among some members of the church—clergy and laity alike—arose in part because of a lack of clarity in the early writings of some theologians who enlisted Marxist elements in their theological approach.⁶⁵ But it was also fueled by what appears to have been a smear campaign organized against this theology by some influential members of the church.⁶⁶ At a more fundamental level, this mistrust also reflected the authoritarian and repressive context in which the church was trying to renew itself. During the Cold War, particularly on a continent governed by the “national security” ideology of the then-ubiquitous military dictatorships, the term “Marxist” inspired fear and was even seen as a just cause for persecution in some Latin American circles. Thus some church members were apprehensive of a theology that enlisted Marxist analysis as a tool to better understand the church’s social world. Liberation

⁶² This prompted Sobrino just a few months after the conference to assert that “Puebla was a struggle between the people who were more interested in watering down the novel and conflict-ridden aspect of [Latin American] reality and that reality itself as brought out by other spokes-persons” (“The Significance of Puebla for the Catholic Church in Latin America,” in *Puebla and Beyond* 289–309, at 295–96).

⁶³ Albertho Methol Ferre, “Puebla procesoy tensiones,” quoted in Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology* 210.

⁶⁴ Unfortunately, some Christians saw no other political alternative but armed struggle. Others, such as the Chilean movement of Christians for Socialism, seized on the Medellín document to justify their support for specific political programs and took sides in party politics. See Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology* 180–88; Lernoux, “Long Path to Puebla” 12–14; and Paul E. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution* (New York: Oxford University, 1990) 46–47.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Nicolas Lash’s assessment of Porfirio Miranda’s early work in Lash, *A Matter of Hope: A Theologian’s Reflection on the Thought of Karl Marx* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 4.

⁶⁶ See Lernoux, “Long Path to Puebla” 20–23; and Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology* 185–86. See also Gregory Baum, “German Theologians and Liberation Theology,” in *Puebla and Beyond* 220–24.

theologians themselves were critical of many aspects of Marxism, but some Catholics, within and beyond the continent, questioned whether these theologians could appropriate Marxist elements without also endorsing Marxism's atheistic philosophical framework.⁶⁷

Disagreements between some bishops over the direction of the Latin American church and reservations about liberation theology on the part of some influential members of the hierarchy contributed to a change of leadership in CELAM. In November 1972, Colombian archbishop Alfonso López Trujillo, an outspoken critic of liberation theology, was elected CELAM's general secretary and was charged with organizing the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops to be held in Puebla, Mexico. The theme of the conference, "The Present and the Future Evangelization of America," was inspired by the 1974 Synod on Evangelization and Paul VI's postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975).⁶⁸ Given the theme, the apostolic exhortation became an important point of reference for Puebla, just as *Populorum progressio* had been for Medellín.⁶⁹

In 1977, the new general secretary of CELAM circulated the preliminary consultative document for the upcoming conference. Abjuring Medellín's inductive approach to the signs of the times, this document enlisted a deductive theological approach to argue that secularism, and not social injustice, was at that time the main challenge facing the Latin American church. The preliminary document was widely discussed by the national episcopates and ultimately rejected because it did not reflect the questions and concerns of their CEBs and grass-roots groups.⁷⁰ A second round of consultations, now including delegates representing a wider

⁶⁷ This helps explain why the letter of Pedro Arrupe, former superior general of the Society of Jesus, on the use of Marxist analysis was so timely and significant. See "Marxist Analysis by Christians," in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 307–13. See also Paul VI's apostolic letter *Octogesima adveniens* (1971). This issue came to a climax in 1984 when the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published its Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation," which argued that Marxism was a "totalizing ideology that could not be selectively endorsed." See Denys Turner, "Marxism, Liberation Theology and the Way of Negation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (New York: Cambridge University, 2007) 229–47, esp. 231–33.

⁶⁸ Alfonso López Trujillo, "On the 25th Anniversary of the Puebla Conference," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_20040212_trujillo-puebla_en.html.

⁶⁹ Galilea, "Latin America in the Medellín and Puebla Conferences" 70.

⁷⁰ See Gustavo Gutierrez, "Liberation and the Poor: The Puebla Perspective," in *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 125–65, at 130. See also Sobrino, "Significance of Puebla" 291; and Laura Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy and Luis H. Serra, *The Church and Revolution in Nicaragua* (Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1986) 3.

constituency—priests, religious, parishes, and the CEBs—was held in 1978, after which a more comprehensive working document was drafted under the direction of CELAM's president, Brazilian Cardinal Aloísio Lorscheider.

John Paul II, who had been elected pope just three months earlier, opened the general conference on January 28, 1979. Both pastoral preoccupations noted above—economic injustice and secularism—were represented in the discussions and are evident in the final document.⁷¹ However, as at Medellín the situation of poverty and oppression endured by most Latin Americans came to the fore in the document as the sign of the times that most urgently required the church's attention.⁷² Early in the final document, the bishops state, "We place ourselves within the dynamic thrust of the Medellín Conference . . . , adopting its vision of reality that served as the inspiration for so many pastoral documents of ours in the past decade" (Puebla no. 25).⁷³ Puebla also endorsed the "see, judge, act" methodology of *Gaudium et spes* and Medellín, and again took the experience of the human person as the point of departure for theological reflection.

In a style reminiscent of *Gaudium et spes*, the final document begins with a pastoral description of the human situation on the continent.⁷⁴ The bishops note the increased deterioration of economic, social, and political conditions since Medellín (Puebla nos. 27–50). To a greater extent than Medellín, the bishops' treatment identifies the structural causes, both domestic and international, that undergird the ongoing violations against human dignity. These causes include an economic system that disregards the human person; a prevailing social order that generates structural conflict; economic, political, and cultural dependence on industrialized nations; political oppression; and the arms race. Thus, the bishops repeatedly declare that the continent is caught in a situation of "institutionalized injustice" and that "the contradictions existing between unjust social structures and the demands of the Gospel are quite evident" (Puebla no. 1257).

At Puebla the bishops also addressed an issue that was very much on the agenda of Vatican II but had barely been considered by Medellín: the relationship between culture and the church. Drawing heavily from *Ad gentes* (Puebla nos. 366, 375) and *Gaudium et spes* (Puebla nos. 386, 391–93, 401, 404),⁷⁵ the bishops encouraged the integration of the continent's three main cultural groups, Mestizos, African-Americans, and Amerindians; following *Evangelii nuntiandi*, the conference called for

⁷¹ Moisés Sandoval, "Report from the Conference," in *Puebla and Beyond* 28–43, at 41.

⁷² Sobrino, "Significance of Puebla" 296.

⁷³ This and all direct references to the final document of the Puebla Conference are taken from "The Final Document," in *Puebla and Beyond* 123–285.

⁷⁴ McGrath, "Impact of *Gaudium et Spes*" 70.

⁷⁵ Galilea, "Latin America in the Medellín and Puebla Conferences" 71.

the evangelization of their cultures (Puebla nos. 385–87, 394, 395, 404). In spite of the church's relative lack of human resources, the bishops, for the first time, called Latin Americans to participate in the universal evangelizing mission of the church (Puebla no. 368).

Puebla further developed Medellín's initial insights into the church's option for the poor. The bishops were mindful that poverty is the result of a dialectical relationship between the haves and the have-nots. Thus the bishops often observe that the poor are not simply "poor," but rather are *impoverished* by mechanisms of oppression. Puebla drew from Matthew 25 to stress Christ's identification with the poor and his presence *in* those who suffer.⁷⁶ "[The] situation of pervasive extreme poverty takes on very concrete faces in real life. In these faces we ought to recognize the suffering features of Christ the Lord who questions and challenges us" (Puebla no. 31). This deepening understanding of the poor as subjects includes the conference's recognition of their evangelizing potential (Puebla no. 950). This constitutes an important advancement over Medellín, which spoke of the plight of the poor and their role as protagonists but did not formally identify the poor as agents of the gospel able to lead others to conversion.

Memorably, Puebla introduced the explicit use of the formula "preferential option for the poor." Indeed, a chapter is dedicated solely to this topic.⁷⁷ While both Medellín and Puebla ground the church's preferential option for the poor in our vocation to follow Christ, Puebla also stresses that this preference is grounded in Christ's gratuitous love. The bishops explain that "[Christ] established solidarity with [the poor] and took up the situation in which they find themselves. . . . For this reason, the poor merit preferential attention, whatever may be the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves" (Puebla nos. 1141–42).

In this third general conference, the ecclesiology articulated in *Lumen gentium* and appropriated by Medellín as "the communion of the poor people of God" continued to shape the Latin American church. Puebla's final document describes a church that is both missionary and a sacrament of communion, characteristics that arise from God's trinitarian fellowship. The church's mission is that of the Son, and it is by proclaiming the good news that the church calls others to participate in the trinitarian communion. Thus the bishops summon the church "to preach conversion, to liberate human beings, and to direct them toward the mystery of communion with the Trinity and with all their brothers and sisters, transforming them into agents and cooperators in God's plan" (Puebla no. 563). As a polyvalent category, *communion* expresses different meanings

⁷⁶ Gutiérrez, "Liberation and the Poor" 142.

⁷⁷ The Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, "Final Document," in *Puebla and Beyond* 264–67.

throughout the document: presence, participation, sharing, and community. It is “because *communion* has this many-leveled meaning, [that] it could express sharing in a common good and mean participating at the same time in trinitarian life, in eucharistic community, and in human and material goods (property, wealth, the economic consultative process, political action).”⁷⁸

In fact, one reason for the growth of CEBs lies in their capacity to foster a Christian life that integrates participants’ religious experience with their commitment to communal and social transformation. At Puebla the bishops reaffirmed the importance of the CEBs and asserted that they “are determined to promote, guide, and accompany the CEBs in the spirit of the Medellín Conference . . . and the guidelines set forth by *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (no. 58)” (Puebla no. 648). As embodiments of the church’s preferential option for the poor (Puebla no. 644), these communities were praised for their capacity to foster a close following of Christ while helping Christians strive for an evangelical life that challenges the egotistical and consumerist roots of today’s society and to “make explicit their vocation to communion with God and their fellow humans.” Thus “they offer a valid and worthwhile point of departure for building up a new society, ‘the civilization of love’” (Puebla no. 643).

In the final analysis, Puebla was not an innovative assembly, in that its primary accomplishment was to deepen and sharpen the themes and insights first developed at Medellín. At Puebla the Latin American church renewed the hope of the poor, continued the renewal brought forth by the council, and confirmed the features that have shaped her into a distinctive church.

FROM PUEBLA TO SANTO DOMINGO (1992)

In the decade following the Puebla conference, the Latin American military regimes that controlled the continent began to give way to democracies. This political liberalization did little to alleviate the perennial economic and social inequality between small, affluent groups and the great majorities. Slow growth, increased inflation, and the international debt crisis led the United Nations to call the 1980s Latin America’s “lost decade.”⁷⁹ At the same time, the emergence and consolidation of new Protestant churches and other religiously-identified social movements that

⁷⁸ Kilian McDonnell, “Vatican II (1962–1964), Puebla (1979), Synod (1985): Koinonia/Communion as Integral Ecclesiology,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25 (1988) 399–427, at 414.

⁷⁹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), “A Brief History of UNCTAD,” <http://unctad.org/en/Pages/About%20UNCTAD/A-Brief-History-of-UNCTAD.aspx>.

had been growing since the 1960s presented a challenge to the Catholic Church's traditional role as the *only* church on the continent.⁸⁰

In commemoration of the quincentennial celebration of the first evangelization of the Americas, the Fourth General Conference, convened in October 1992 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, on the theme of the "New Evangelization." The theme had been announced to the Latin America bishops by John Paul II in a 1983 address delivered in Haiti; it was a recurring motif in John Paul's papacy and can be traced to his Christocentric reading of *Gaudium et spes*.⁸¹ In his address, the pope asked the bishops for a "commitment not to re-evangelization but to a new evangelization, new in ardor, methods, and expression."⁸²

More so than its predecessors, this episcopal gathering was complex and at times conflicted, reflecting the ambiguities inherent in the process of interpreting and receiving an event such as Vatican II. The conference was preceded by a long preparation filled with tensions, reservations, misgivings, and at least two distinct visions of how the Latin American church should carry out this "New Evangelization."⁸³ Santo Domingo's process involved the same tensions over pastoral priorities that had been operative at Puebla. Here again some bishops maintained that the greatest need was to confront the challenges presented by contemporary culture, such as secularization and the increased presence of Protestant churches; for others, the most important matter was the prevalence of poverty in Latin America and the lack of an inculturated proclamation of the gospel among the indigenous population and the great majorities. Where Santo Domingo differed was in the increased number and influence of bishops representing

⁸⁰ Daniel Levine, "Pluralism as Challenge and Opportunity," in *Religious Pluralism, Democracy, and the Catholic Church in Latin America*, ed. Frances Hagopian (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2009) 405–28, at 408. See also Edward Cleary, "The Journey to Santo Domingo," in *Santo Domingo and Beyond: Documents and Commentaries from the Historic Meetings of the Latin American Bishops' Conference*, ed. Alfred Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 3–23, at 9.

⁸¹ Uruguayan theologian Fernando Verdugo asserts that while the conference was carried out in the context of the Americas' conquest and first evangelization, the "New Evangelization" was John Paul II's large personal project. It is not a coincidence, Verdugo notes, that in practice this conference was not led by CELAM but by the Latin American Pontifical Commission ("Aparecida: Perspectiva teológico-cultural," *Teología y vida* 49 [2008] 673–84, at 677).

⁸² "The Task of Latin America's Bishops, Address of Pope John Paul II to the Latin American Bishops' Council," *Origins* 12 (1983) 659–62, at 661.

⁸³ Many conference observers were unsettled by the excessive intervention of Vatican officials in the preparation, discussion, and drafting of the final document in the Santo Domingo conference. See Jon Sobrino, "The Winds in Santo Domingo and the Evangelization of Culture," in *Santo Domingo and Beyond* 167–83, at 170. See also Codina, "Eclesiología de Aparecida" 107–8.

the former stance, largely because of John Paul II's appointments in the preceding decade.⁸⁴

Under the supervision of the Latin American Pontifical Commission, CELAM drafted three preparatory documents. The *Consultative Document* published in 1991 proposed that the main challenge faced by the church came from modern culture, as noted above. This was subsequently rejected by the bishops because it did not incorporate the contributions of the recent national bishops' conferences. A second document, aptly named *Segunda relation*, did gather ideas from the national bishops' conferences and other ecclesial organizations. This document proposed that the problems of modern culture and poverty facing the church should be addressed in a unified manner, beginning with the problems of poverty and marginalization.⁸⁵ This second document was rejected by Vatican officials, as well as by some of the Latin American bishops.⁸⁶ A final *Working Document* that incorporated the previous two documents was then drafted by the secretary general of CELAM and sent to Rome for approval. Rome initially approved this final *Working Document*, but at the beginning of the conference reclassified it as one of the consultative documents to be used in the discussions.⁸⁷

The three distinct theological elements I have been tracing—reading the signs of the times, the preferential option for the poor, and the CEBs—are treated in the final document within the framework set by the main themes of the conference: New evangelization, human development, and Christian culture. Yet, the document to emerge from this conference differs notably from those produced by previous conferences in that it does not begin with an analysis of reality, a discernment of the signs of the times. Instead of adopting as its method the inductive approach of “see, judge, act,” Santo Domingo took as its point of departure the bishops' rather ahistorical christological reflections.⁸⁸ While the document does not mention liberation theology, it reaffirmed its continuity with Medellín and Puebla as the bishops committed themselves to “renew [their] intention to further the

⁸⁴ Víctor Codina, “IV Conferencia del Episcopado Latinoamericano: Santo Domingo; Dos visiones diferentes,” *Revista electrónica de teología* no. 14, <http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/014.htm>. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, “An Agenda: The Conference at Santo Domingo,” in *Density of the Present* 113–23, at 114

⁸⁵ Gutiérrez, “An Agenda: The Conference at Santo Domingo” 114.

⁸⁶ Alfred Hennelly, “A Report from the Conference,” in *Santo Domingo and Beyond* 24–36, at 26.

⁸⁷ Alfred Hennelly (*ibid.* 26–27) notes that on the first day of the conference the bishops were instructed to discard the *Working Document*, sabotaging years of work by the Latin American bishops.

⁸⁸ Some chapters, such as the one on human development and Christian culture, do pay relatively more attention to the Latin American context. See Sobrino, “The Winds in Santo Domingo and the Evangelization of Culture” 177.

pastoral guidelines, set by Vatican II, which were applied at the General Conferences of Latin American Bishops at Medellín and Puebla, and bring them up to date by means of the pastoral guidelines laid down at this conference" (Santo Domingo no. 298).⁸⁹

Consequently, Santo Domingo upholds the church's preferential option for the poor (Santo Domingo nos. 50, 179, 180, 275, 296, 302), which informs the pastoral priorities for the church's evangelizing mission. Theologically, the conference grounds this in the church's vocation to follow Jesus Christ, who "[came] to bring 'glad tidings' to the poor" (Santo Domingo no. 179). Nonetheless, the issue of economic poverty and injustice is not treated with the same depth and vigor of previous conferences, as the bishops dedicate significant attention to the need for a new evangelization and to the relationship between religion and culture.⁹⁰

The relation between culture and the church had already been noted at Medellín and initially developed at Puebla, but the bishops now turned to the task of inculturating the gospel.⁹¹ Here again they grounded this pastoral task in the Incarnation, noting that "Jesus Christ is the measure of all things human, including culture" (Santo Domingo no. 228). Drawing from John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (1990), the bishops noted that "through inculturation, the Church makes the gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her community" (Santo Domingo no. 230). In this, Santo Domingo marks the first time in Latin America that a synod or episcopal conference developed a pastoral plan directed to the evangelization of the indigenous, African-American, and Mestizo cultures.

The conference also endorsed Medellín and Puebla's communion ecclesiology, but this theme was not furthered. The final document refers to the church as a "sacrament of evangelizing communion" (Santo Domingo no. 123), but although the bishops summon the church to "embody the driving forces of communion and mission" (Santo Domingo no. 55), they do not offer a systematic treatment of ecclesiology. In the same vein, Santo Domingo "reaffirm[s] the validity of basic Christian communities" (Santo Domingo no. 62), but its reflections on them are limited. Some Latin

⁸⁹ This and all direct references to the final document of the Santo Domingo Conference are taken from "Santo Domingo Documents," in *Santo Domingo and Beyond* 39–150.

⁹⁰ Roberto Goizueta argues that Santo Domingo, diverting from Medellín and Puebla, reduces the preferential option for the poor to an "ethical injunction" and "no longer primarily a privileged epistemological criterion of faith." See "The Preferential Option for the Poor: The CELAM Documents and the NCCB Pastoral Letter on U.S. Hispanics as Sources for U.S. Hispanic Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3.2 (1995) 65–77, at 72.

⁹¹ One can trace the beginnings of a theology of inculturation to *Ad gentes* no. 11, which speaks of the "seed of the Word" said to be contained in various cultures.

American theologians and bishops lamented that the themes of Medellín and Puebla were not advanced at Santo Domingo, and that the conference's final document does not have the "prophetic energy" of Medellín or the "theological density" of Puebla.⁹²

FROM SANTO DOMINGO TO APARECIDA (2007)

For many Latin Americans the conference at Aparecida, Brazil, was a welcome surprise. John Paul II's 1997 call for continental synods had given rise to speculation that they would henceforth replace the general conferences of Latin American bishops.⁹³ The Synod for the Americas would have included the bishops from Latin America, Canada, and the United States assembled in Rome, and it would have submitted its work to the pope, who would later publish a document under his authority.⁹⁴ Many Latin American church leaders and observers were concerned that this change would erode the identity that the Latin American church had forged, beginning with Medellín. Yet by 2003, after a number of unsuccessful attempts, the office of the new CELAM president, Cardinal Francisco Javier Errázuriz, was able to convince John Paul II to convene a general conference instead of a synod.⁹⁵ There was much relief two years later when Benedict XVI endorsed CELAM's proposal to celebrate its 50th anniversary with a general conference that he himself would convene at Aparecida in Brazil.

The assembly was held, once again, against the backdrop of a deeply troubled region. Though military dictatorships were almost entirely a thing of the past, the new century was marked by increasing dissatisfaction with the young democracies' apparent incapacity to overcome the structural problems that undergirded the acute social and economic inequalities of much of the continent.⁹⁶ The promises made by proponents of globalization in the early 1990s had not materialized. Rather, globalization and 15 years of "neo-liberal" policies of structural adjustments had increased the gap between the rich and poor nations, generated poverty and marginalization for the great majority, undermined local cultures, and further

⁹² Gutierréz, "An Agenda: The Conference at Santo Domingo" 123.

⁹³ João Batista Libanio, "Conferencia de Aparecida: Documento final," *Revista iberoamericana de teología* (2008) 23–46, at 24.

⁹⁴ Sergio Torres, "Amerindia: Return from Internal Exile," in *Aparecida: Quo Vadis?*, ed. Robert Pelton (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton, 2008) 137–58, at 149.

⁹⁵ Aparecida marks the first time that bishops representing Canada and the United States were invited to a general conference [assembly?] not just as observers but also as voting members.

⁹⁶ See "The Results of Aparecida: Monographic Issue," *Revista proceso* 1247 (June 27, 2007), <http://www.uca.edu.sv/publica/cidai/proceso.1247i.pdf>.

devastated natural resources.⁹⁷ The same 15 years had witnessed the departure of an unprecedented number of Catholics from the church, and the progressive transformation of the continent into an increasingly secular and religiously pluralized region.⁹⁸

Preparation for the fifth general conference, which was given the title “Missionary Disciples of Jesus Christ: That Our Peoples May Have Life in Him,” began in 2006 with the *Document of Participation* (past conferences referred to this as a *Document of Consultation*). As in the previous two conferences, this preliminary document was roundly criticized by most local churches.⁹⁹ Many veterans of Puebla and Medellín note that the *Document of Participation* again ignored the “see, judge, act” method and proposed an abstract and deductive Christology; it also put forth an ecclesiology that was centered in the institutional church and barely mentioned God’s kingdom.¹⁰⁰ Others noted that the document paid no attention to the CEBs or to the witness of the recent Latin American martyrs.¹⁰¹ In all, 22 national episcopal conferences submitted formal responses to the *Document of Participation*. Based on these contributions, a task force from CELAM prepared a *Synthesis Document* (in past conferences referred to as a *Working Document*) that heeded the request made by most of the national conferences to reinstate the “see, judge, act” method and to stress the centrality of God’s kingdom.¹⁰²

Aparecida’s final document describes the conference as “a new step in the church’s journey, especially since the ecumenical council Vatican II” (Aparecida no. 9).¹⁰³ In accord with the bishops’ insistence on retaining the “see, judge, act” method, the document begins with a detailed evaluation

⁹⁷ See United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Inequalities and Asymmetries in the Global Order,” chap. 4 in *Globalization and Development: A Latin American and Caribbean Perspective*, ed. José Antonio Ocampo and Juan Martín (Washington: World Bank, 2003) 99–128; also available at <http://www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/xm/0/10030/Globalization-Chap3.pdf>.

⁹⁸ In the last ten years, approximately 30 million Catholics have left the church in Latin America and the Caribbean. See Pablo Richard, “Será posible ahora construir un nuevo modelo de iglesia?,” in *Aparecida: Renacer de una esperanza* 93–98, at 94; and Edward Cleary, “Aparecida and Pentecostalism in Latin America,” in *Aparecida: Quo vadis?* 159–72.

⁹⁹ See Agenor Brighenti, “Crónica del desarrollo de la V Conferencia,” in *Aparecida: Renacer de una esperanza* 25–34, esp. 27.

¹⁰⁰ Codina, “Eclesiología de Aparecida” 109.

¹⁰¹ See Agenor Brighenti, “Crónica del desarrollo de la V Conferencia” 25–34, esp. 26–27.

¹⁰² Codina, “Eclesiología de Aparecida” 110.

¹⁰³ This and all direct references to the final document of the Aparecida Conference are taken from V General Conference of the Bishops of Latin American and the Caribbean, “Concluding Document” (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2008), <http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/english/continentalmission.shtml/>.

of the social, economic, political, ecclesial, and cultural signs of the times. For the bishops, globalization is the complex phenomenon that best explains the challenges currently faced by the church (Aparecida no. 43): in Latin America, globalization has become the cause of new types of poverty. Focusing on the core economic values that fuel this new process of internationalization, the bishops warn that “in globalization, market forces easily absolutize efficacy and productivity as values regulating all human relations” (Aparecida no. 61). This instrumental way of thinking excludes transcendent values such as justice, truth, and human dignity, particularly the dignity of those not included in the market. The bishops thus conclude that a new type of globalization is necessary: “one characterized by solidarity, justice, and respect for human rights” (Aparecida no. 64).

In his inaugural address on the morning of May 13, 2007, Benedict XVI firmly embraced the preferential option for the poor that had distinguished the Latin American church since Medellín. He reminded the bishops that “the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9).”¹⁰⁴ Aparecida quotes the pope directly and builds on *Lumen gentium* no. 8 to insist that “We Christians . . . are called to contemplate, in the suffering faces of our brothers and sisters, the face of Christ who calls us to serve Him in them” (Aparecida no. 393). The bishops offer a complex understanding of poverty that is not limited to economic factors but also includes “the silenced cry of women who are subjected to many forms of exclusion and violence” (Aparecida no. 454) and the marginalization of indigenous and African populations (Aparecida no. 89). They are subjects that “need to shape their own destiny” (Aparecida no. 53) and through the recuperation of their identities “participate actively and creatively in building this continent” (Aparecida no. 97).¹⁰⁵ Rounding out the teaching on the option for the poor, the bishops, for the first time in a general conference, elaborate on the personal dimension of this option rooted in what can be described as a christological friendship: “Only the closeness that makes us friends enables us to appreciate deeply the values of the poor today, their legitimate desires, and their own manner of living the faith” (Aparecida no. 398). Moreover, the bishops affirm that the preferential option for the poor is not just a matter of ethics, but rather is also a holistic stance inherent in the Catholic faith: “That it is preferential means that

¹⁰⁴ Benedict XVI, Inaugural Session of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin American and the Caribbean, May 13, 2007, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070513_conference-aparecida_en.html.

¹⁰⁵ See Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Aparecida: La opción preferencial por el pobre,” in *Aparecida: Renacer de una esperanza* 127–38, at 133.

it should permeate all our pastoral structures and priorities. The Latin American church is called to be [a] sacrament of love, solidarity, and justice within our peoples" (Aparecida no. 396).¹⁰⁶

Aparecida's *communio* ecclesiology (Aparecida nos. 304, 305) stands in close continuity with the ecclesiology developed by Vatican II and appropriated by Medellín, Puebla, and Santo Domingo.¹⁰⁷ The bishops articulated this ecclesiology according to their appreciation of the Latin American church's most pressing task in the 21st century: "to show the church's capacity to promote and form disciples and missionaries who respond to the calling received and to communicate everywhere . . . the gift of the encounter with Jesus Christ" (Aparecida no. 14). Within this pastoral directive, the bishops note that the CEBs "have been schools that have helped form Christians committed to their faith, disciples and missionaries of the Lord" (Aparecida no. 178). Indeed, "they deploy their evangelizing and missionary commitment among the humblest and most distant, and they visibly express the preferential option for the poor" (Aparecida no. 179). These communities then continue to be a significant structure of the Latin American church even though the support of the hierarchical church has not always been consistent, and unfounded rumors of their suppression are sometimes spread.¹⁰⁸

At Aparecida, the bishops unequivocally endorsed, and in some cases expanded, their teaching on the three central theological principles I have been tracing in the reception of Vatican II since Medellín: the signs of the times, the preferential option for the poor, and an ecclesiology of communion expressed in the CEBs. The dynamism in this process of reception is evinced in some of the new themes engaged by Aparecida, including

¹⁰⁶ On the impact of the preferential option for the poor on the following of Jesus, the task of theology, and the proclamation of the gospel, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009) 317–26.

¹⁰⁷ While some theologians contend that Aparecida has a balanced view of the collaboration between grassroots and hierarchical leaders, others argue that it favors an ecclesiology from above, in which "the Church understands itself as the one who possesses, keeps, and guards the transmitted doctrine and creates the necessary space for living such doctrine." João Batista Libanio, "Conferencia de Aparecida: Documento final," *Revista iberoamericana de teología* 6 (2008) 23–46, at 37 (my translation).

¹⁰⁸ Robert Pelton, "Medellin and Puebla: Dead or Alive in the 21st Century Catholic Church?," in *Aparecida: Quo vadis?* 25–48, at 33. It should be noted that the sections on the CEBs were those most altered by the Vatican before Aparecida's final document was approved. For a detailed study of these changes, see Rolando Muñoz, "Los cambios al documento de Aparecida," in *Aparecida: Renacer de una esperanza* 298–308.

the continent's ecological devastation, popular religion, and martyrdom. There is a clear consensus among many Latin American theologians that Aparecida was a reaffirmation of the distinct features of the post-Vatican II Latin American church and a ratification of the theological-pastoral direction first assumed at Medellín in the wake of the council.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, some see in Aparecida the rebirth of a hope ushered in 50 years ago by Vatican II and first appropriated by Medellín.¹¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The transformation of the Latin American church in the wake of Vatican II can be characterized as a process through which the church came into its own. While Latin America was poised for change on the eve of the 1960s, the council provided the theological catalyst for the regional church to deepen its authentic identity and mission, and to refashion the relationships that had historically tied her to the continent's structures of economic and political power. Far from a mere repetition of the theological insights, teachings, and practices formulated during the four productive years of the council, the reception of Vatican II has been a decades-long creative interpretation and selective appropriation of the council's message according to the circumstances and needs of the Latin American people. Through this process, the church began to draw closer to the great majorities of the continent and to incorporate their concerns and aspirations into her life and mission.

Amid the diversity and complexity of the Latin American Catholic Church, the theological development that has taken place there since Vatican II reflects an overall theological and pastoral continuity that has helped it emerge as a distinctive expression of the universal church. Across the ecclesial gatherings rehearsed above, three theological elements have been consistently engaged: attentive discernment of the signs of the times in light of the gospel; the preferential option for the poor, which is rooted in a christological faith; and the development of a *communio* ecclesiology as expressed in the CEBs. Though these principles continue to be contested

¹⁰⁹ Gutierrez, "Aparecida: La opción preferencial por el pobre" 127. Clodovis Boff, for example, claims that Aparecida is the highest achievement of the Latin American magisterium, and that it best recapitulates the previous CELAM conferences. See *Revista do Instituto Humanitas Unisinos*, quoted by Jose Carlos Caamaño in his "Cristo y la vida plena: Aportes a la recepción de Aparecida," *Revista Teologica* 94 (2007) 445–56, at 447.

¹¹⁰ The title of the anthology and commentary published on Aparecida by the Amerindia group of Latin American theologians, which includes authors such as José Comblin, Víctor Codina, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Pablo Richard, Sergio Torres, is telling: *Aparecida el renacer de una esperanza* (Aparecida, the Rebirth of a Hope).

by certain sectors of the church, they represent the most distinctive components of a region-wide effort to live out Vatican II in Latin America.

These three elements are deeply interrelated. It is the turn to history and the discernment of the signs of the times that leads the church to take a preferential stance on behalf of the poor; and in Latin America this option has been clearly expressed in the life and structure of the CEBs. Among these three theological principles, the preferential option for the poor is the most defining and prophetic. It provides a hermeneutical perspective that guides the church's pastoral directives and priorities, orients Christian praxis toward a more authentic following of Jesus Christ, and should be incorporated into the church's theological reflection. Thus understood, the preferential option for the poor is the most important contribution of the Latin American church to the universal church and is a necessary step in the fulfilling John XXIII's wish for the Second Vatican Council: that it would lead us to become "a church of the poor."