

THE RECEPTION OF VATICAN II IN LATIN AMERICA: A NORTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

ROBERT S. PELTON, C.S.C.

The article supplements the one by Ernesto Valiente published in the December 2012 issue of this journal. It adds information not covered by him, as well as first-hand observations on such matters as the impact of foreign religious on the region, Latin American contributions to Vatican II, the current standing of base ecclesial communities, the option for the poor, and the national missions requested at Aparecida 2007.

THIS RESPONSE to Ernesto Valiente's recent article in this journal is intended not as criticism but rather as a supplement that expands several points about which I have first-hand knowledge and experience.¹ I hope that this information will provide scholars of Latin America and other interested persons with an agenda for further study in inter-American church relations, thus helping them build on existing works and more easily recognize new needs.

Valiente's article accurately points out where both the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) and most Latin American societies currently stand in relation to Vatican II and to Aparecida. Few would dispute his judgment that the Latin American church has come of age since the council, that it has developed its own distinct identity within the universal church, and that both church and society have derived great benefits from paying careful attention to the signs of the times while shaping the identity

ROBERT S. PELTON, C.S.C., received his STD from St. Thomas University, Rome, and is currently faculty fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies and director of Latin American/North American Church Concerns (LANACC), both at the University of Notre Dame. Specializing in Latin America, liberation theology, Small Christian Communities (also known as CEBs and BECs), Archbishop Oscar Romero, and martyrdom in Latin America, he has recently published "North America," in *Living Cells*, ed. James O'Halloran (2010); and "A Preferential and Evangelizing Option for the Poor: The Catholic Church from Medellín to Aparecida," in *Religion and Society in Latin America*, ed. Lee M. Penyak and Walter Perry (2009). He also produced the LASA award-winning documentary *Monseñor: The Last Journey of Oscar Romero*. In progress is an article on the role of the laity in the Christianity of Latin America for *The Oxford Handbook for the Christian Church*.

¹ O. Ernesto Valiente, "The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012) 795–823.

and mission of the Latin American church. Valiente also assesses very well the reception of Vatican II from a Latin American point of view.² Let me now briefly consider the subject from a North American point of view.

CLERGY INFLUX

The huge influx of North American and European clergy into Latin America mentioned by Valiente was in large part a response to Pope John XXIII's call for help in ameliorating the critical shortage of clergy in Latin America during the early 1960s. Speaking in the name of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America at the Second Religious Congress of the United States, held at the University of Notre Dame in August of 1961, Monsignor Agostino Casaroli appealed for ten percent of US religious to serve in Latin America.³ Although the suggested percentage was not achieved before the decade's end, many thousands of priests, brothers, and sisters—including many of "the best and most qualified" specifically requested by Casaroli—responded to this invitation.

When I was chair of Notre Dame's Department of Theology, I heard and was moved by Casaroli's address. Earlier, I had collaborated with John Considine, M.M., to promote greater interest in the Latin American church by sponsoring a graduate course on inter-American relations within Notre Dame's Department of Theology. It was Considine who first suggested to the Vatican that religious from the United States and Canada go to Latin America, and he, more than anyone else, shaped and focused the attitudes and activities of the missionaries with his three-part theory of mission: intensive cultural and linguistic education of the visiting religious; creation of strong Christian communities where teaching of the gospel prepared people for eternal life while simultaneously improving their temporal well-being; and a strong sense of solidarity with the local people and a dedication to work with them for justice on their behalf.⁴

² For more on Latin American/North American church interaction see Mary M. McGlone for the US Catholic Conference, *Sharing Faith across the Hemisphere/ Compartiendo la Fe en El Hemisferio* (Washington: USCC, 1997; also available as a VHS video recording, English only, with discussion guide in audio cassette recording) a comprehensive study of inter-American church relations conducted by the US Catholic Conference of Bishops in 1995 to 1996. James Ronan, then the Executive Director of the Secretariat for Latin America, oversaw the project; and Robert Pelton, C.S.C., coordinated it. This study clearly demonstrates the influence that the Latin American church has on many of the pastoral and intellectual dimensions of the US Catholic Church.

³ See Robert Hurteau, *A Worldwide Heart: A Life of Father John Considine* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

⁴ See Gerald M. Costello, *Mission to Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); it details Considine's pivotal role in preparing foreign clergy for service in Latin America.

Large-scale missionary presence was sharply criticized by some, especially Ivan Illich, who feared a long-term “Americanization” of the Latin American church,⁵ but essentially, this did not happen. Whether due to the emphasis on cultural education during their preparation or to the triumph of solidarity over ethnocentrism, most of the missionaries eventually recognized that the purpose of their presence was to assist the parishes and the people of Latin America, not to impose US attitudes and customs on them. The mission surge came to be welcomed by many within Latin America as well, especially after it became clear that the foreign missionaries came not in a spirit of domination but rather in a spirit of solidarity with their Latin American brothers and sisters, and with a compelling desire to assist local efforts to foster communities in which gospel messages could become tangible works for social and economic justice.

Thus, Considine’s theories of missionary activity were definitely successful, and many of his ways of “doing theology” are still bearing fruit throughout much of contemporary Latin America. An excellent biography of Considine by Robert Hurteau has been available to the public since the end of June 2013.⁶ Hurteau also analyzes the later missionary efforts of the Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle, Maryknoll Associates, Papal Volunteers, and others. This is a significant contribution.

The late Edward Cleary, O.P., reported that the number of seminarians throughout Latin America has increased by approximately 400 percent since 1972, and that there has been a 70 percent increase in Latin American clergy replacing clergy “on loan” from other continents.⁷ This is a remarkable reversal of the situation of the 1960s. Conversely, Fr. James Oscar Beozzo has repeatedly warned of severe shortages of religious,⁸ a clergy-to-lay ratio of 1:8,600 in Brazil, for example. Both the numbers and ratios vary from diocese to diocese and from country to country, but all Latin American nations are experiencing shortages so pronounced as to leave holes in the churches’ pastoral nets. Despite the apparent contradiction, both statements are simultaneously true. Every continent is experiencing shortages of vocations, but Latin America is

⁵ Ivan Illich, “The Seamy Side of Charity: An Authority on the Church in Latin America Makes Some Blunt Statements about the American Missionary Work in South America,” *America* 116.3 (January 21, 1967) 88–91.

⁶ Robert Hurteau, *A Worldwide Heart: A Life of Father John Considine* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

⁷ “Featured Q&A with Our Board of Advisors,” *Inter-American Dialogue* (March 20–April 2, 2007) 1, 6, http://advisor.thedialogue.org/docs/financial_services_advisor/FSA070320.pdf. All URLs cited herein were accessed on May 17, 2013.

⁸ John L. Allen, “Benedict’s Priorities: Feeding Humanities Spiritual and Material Hunger” (NCRcafe, May 2007).

responding imaginatively and successfully—largely by relying on lay catechists, delegates of the Word, and the lay men and women of the Christian Base Communities (CEBs).

LATIN AMERICAN INFLUENCE AT VATICAN II

As Enrique Dussel has asserted, Vatican II was driven primarily by Europeans who had little personal knowledge of the problems inherent to developing nations, but certain Latin American bishops had far greater impact than is often believed.⁹ When planning for Vatican II began, Dean Marcos McGrath, C.S.C., a classmate of mine and later archbishop of Panama, led the Pontifical Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Santiago in the preparations. Cardinal Raúl Silva and Bishop Manuel Larraín initiated extensive contacts with pastoral leaders in Belgium, France, and Germany in order to better prioritize issues for conciliar discussion. Later they were especially effective in fostering communication and interchange of ideas between Latin American centers studying the sociology of religion (EISOC and the Jesuit-founded FERES) with their European counterparts including those of Belgium's University of Louvain and the Catholic Institute in Paris. Although now remembered more for his steadfast defense of human rights than as a theologian, Silva's interventions on the council floor reflect a clear understanding and deep commitment to the theology of Congar, Suhard, and Suenens, as well as vast knowledge of the realities of life in Latin America.¹⁰

Silva, McGrath, Larraín, and other Latin American theologians played major roles in focusing attention on the challenges that the widespread poverty of underdeveloped nations poses for the church¹¹ and thus helped open the door for active engagement of socioeconomic issues. Limited space does not allow me to include here a full list of South American and Central American contributions to the Second Vatican Council, but it is clear that several Latin American bishops were vital participants in the council, and that they entered into the vanguard of thought at Vatican II.¹²

⁹ Enrique Dussel, "Latin America," in *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, ed. Adrian Hastings (New York: Oxford University, 1991) 319–25.

¹⁰ Luis Antonio Diaz Herrera, ed., *En Concilio Vaticano II y las intervenciones del Cardenal Silva Henríquez* (Santiago, Chile: Revista Mensaje, 2007).

¹¹ 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, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1987) 171–93.

¹² Robert L. Ball, Kyle Markham, and Robert S. Pelton, *The Future of Our Past: The Rev. Robert S. Pelton's Life and Vision of Notre Dame in the New Millennium* (South Bend, IN: Diamond Communications, 2001).

It is virtually impossible not to recognize the enormous impact that the council has had—and will continue to have—within both the Catholic Church and society as a whole. Among many other accomplishments, the council created the base for a new way of being church,¹³ and it created a remarkable synergy that allows concrete initiatives to build on one another. Thus, discernment of the signs of the times led the church to much broader definitions of its mission in the world, which in turn led to greater understanding of the importance of the preferential option for the poor. Increased recognition of the spirituality and full participation of the laity, seen as crucial to the true meaning of the Body of Christ, led to the foundations underlying the CEBs, and the concept of people of God opens the door to a church of the poor.¹⁴

THE PREFERENTIAL AND EVANGELIZING OPTION FOR THE POOR

The Latin American church came into its own at CELAM II in Medellín, Columbia, in 1968. Seeking “the presence of the Church in the current transformation of Latin America in the light of Vatican II,” the bishops of Latin America brought forth the preferential option for the poor. It was only one of CELAM’s creative applications of the council-mandated renewal of a continent gripped by severe poverty, social injustice, and institutionalized sin, but it soon became a cornerstone of the Latin American church’s dedication to a Christianity that unites faith with justice and service to the kingdom of God in accord with the teachings of Jesus Christ. More than four decades later, the preferential option for the poor continues to serve as a lifeline to millions of marginalized persons, as a key element of the church’s social mission, and as a model that has influenced North America as well.

Among the majority of experienced Latin American priests, the preferential option for the poor—which was broadened at Aparecida into the preferential and evangelizing option for the poor—is regarded as one of the most crucial elements of their pastorates. Some younger priests, who may have grown up in more affluent circumstances than most of their parishioners, sometimes leave the seminaries with rather conservative viewpoints. Pastoral realities, however, quickly teach most of them that the preferential option is essential to the physical, mental, social, and spiritual

¹³ Robert S. Pelton, C.S.C., *From Power to Communion: Toward a New Way of Being Church Based on the Latin American Experience* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1994).

¹⁴ José Comblin, *People of God*, ed. and trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

well-being and, not infrequently, to the very survival of countless destitute persons. CELAM clearly stated this reality:

In many Latin American countries, most of the Catholic population is made up of poor people who live excluded from the material, cultural, and social riches present in our countries. The preferential option for the poor distinguished the church of the region and was influential in other churches. Today, this option faces new challenges that demand its renewal, so that it may manifest the fullness of its evangelical roots, its urgency, and its gospel riches.¹⁵

Six times at Aparecida the bishops of Latin America strongly reaffirmed the preferential and evangelizing option for the poor, terming it one of “the pastoral aspects that had the greatest resonance in the life of the Church” (no. 21). The bishops cited weaknesses in observing it as a sin that individuals must repent of and correct (no. 79); called for a new integrating synthesis between the option for the poor and care for the middle class (no. 82); called it a major christological criterion for the missionary path of the church (no. 167); and recognized evangelization of the poor as the great messianic sign that Christians are called to live as church (no. 165). The preferential option for the poor has also been affirmed by four successive pontiffs, most recently by Pope Benedict XVI who said, at Aparecida in 2007, “The poor are the privileged audience for the Gospel.” The preferential option has also been engraved in the Catholic Church’s 1983 Code of Canon Law: “The Christian faithful are also obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor from their own resources” (c. 222.2). Clearly the preferential and evangelizing option for the poor is well ensconced, both in the church and across the continent.

BASE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES

One may quibble with the inclusion of Christian base communities among Vatican II’s many contributions to the Latin American church since the first *comunidad de base*¹⁶ was founded in Brazil six years before the council convened in October 1962. There is little question, however, that the predominantly lay-led CEBs are in close accord with both the ecclesiology of communion and the discernment of the signs of the times called for by the council. Nor is there any doubt that CEBs multiplied rapidly in the wake of the council or that they have played a major role in the development of a church that is truly Latin American.

¹⁵ *Synthesis of Contributions Received for the Fifth General Conference* no. 346 (CELAM V, 2006), <http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/documentosistesisEnglish.pdf>.

¹⁶ The term is synonymous with Christian base community, base ecclesial community, CEB, BEC, and Small Christian Community (SCC).

Hundreds of thousands of CEBs continue to serve a multiplicity of needs across Central and South America and on the other continents as well. As one example, Fr. James Ronan, formerly the Executive Director of the Secretariat for Latin America, describes the works of Sister Ruth, who founded a Christian base community among “the poorest of the poor” in a squalid encampment on the Hill of the Goats near Duran, Ecuador.¹⁷ Sister Ruth, a retired teacher, started a school for children who would otherwise have received no formal education, conducted Bible study and prayer groups, and worked tirelessly to improve the lives of the financially and spiritually destitute, especially the women and children. Most importantly, she taught the formerly anomic villagers the value of solidarity and community. As the CEB grew and became more energized, members pooled their resources to give food and clothing to those in greater need, helped one another find jobs, and rescued a teenage girl who had been sold into prostitution by her desperate mother. In time, small loans were obtained from local lenders, modest houses began to replace shacks, many who had been baptized Catholic were belatedly evangelized, and hope began to replace despair.

Although few CEBs attain such notable successes, the vast majority are meeting very real needs of their brothers and sisters in specific times and places, adapting themselves to new tasks whenever a new challenge arises.¹⁸ “Thinking on their feet” and changing as rapidly as their communities change is a clear indication of success, not of failure or disarray, as some have claimed.

Indeed, CEBs are so numerous throughout Latin America and are making so many vital contributions to the economically and spiritually deprived¹⁹ that it is all too easy to equate their current status with the strength and resources at their disposal during the 1960s and 1970s. In truth, many are facing challenges that often escape notice. Active support from the church has waned over the years, and not all CEBs are receiving the same level of promotion and guidance that they received four decades ago.²⁰ Although some dioceses embraced them, others give them a low priority. Thus some CEBs are thriving, while others struggle to attain even

¹⁷ James J. Ronan, “The Hill of the Goats: Solidarity with the Poor in Latin America,” <http://old.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/97rlpron.shtml>.

¹⁸ Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza, “Latin America and the Catholic Church: Points of Convergence and Divergence (*encontros e desencontros*), 1960–2005, Kellogg Working Paper 334, February 2007 (Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame).

¹⁹ Luis Gómez de Souza, *Do Vaticano II a um novo concílio?* (Sao Paulo: Loyola, 1962).

²⁰ Joseph G. Healey, M.M., and Jeanne Hinton, *Small Christian Communities Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).

a small fraction of their potential. There are numerous causes, including dechristianization, rapid urbanization, and the rootlessness of contemporary society; but in some cases the church must bear its share of responsibility for the CEBs' lack of success. As Fr. José Aldunate points out, CEBs must be periodically renewed; they need and deserve full encouragement and cooperation from their dioceses.²¹

Clear guidelines for just such renewal have already been compiled. In preparation for CELAM V, the bishops of Latin America sponsored a continental meeting in Quito, Ecuador, during May 2006, at which I was an invited participant. In my essay, "Small Christian Communities: Schools for the Followers and Missioners of Jesus Christ," I compiled detailed information about the successes, failures, and challenges of CEBs across the continent and made realistic assessments of their futures.²²

After three days of intensive discussion, the approximately 50 bishops, priests, brothers, sisters, and lay persons representing 18 national conferences drafted specific recommendations to help the CEBs overcome challenges and avoid potential pitfalls. These recommendations included: periodic renewal of church support for CEBs flowing from *Gaudium et spes* and the Medellín and Puebla conferences; granting CEBs minimal juridical recognition so that they do not depend solely on the regional hierarchy; recognition that CEBs are perpetual works in progress and must be provided with "missionary space" to move in new directions; recognition of CEBs as both the nucleus of the present and future church and as its ancestor; heightened respect for the work of the Spirit in the grass roots of the church; greater awareness of the prophetic role of CEBs; and fuller appreciation of their multicultural dimensions. The participants took these recommendations back to their home churches and to the planning session of CELAM V. Sadly, these much-needed reinforcements of the CEBs have yet to materialize as fully and as universally as was hoped. The Latin American bishops strongly supported the CEBs in the text issued during CELAM's Fifth General Conference at Aparecida; but procedures did not strictly conform to established norms,²³ so the Vatican-approved final document makes no mention of need for support from parishes and dioceses. Medellín's emphasis upon CEBs as the basic cells of the church is fully respected, but the final document lumps them in with a broad array of

²¹ José Aldunate, S.J., *Recepción del Concilio Vaticano II por la Iglesia Chilena* (Santiago, Chile: Centro Ecuménico Diego de Medellín, 2010).

²² I include a summary of the meeting's findings. Bibliographical citation of them is impossible since no formal document was ever produced, other than working papers and participants' notes.

²³ Ronaldo Muñoz. *Los cambios al documento de Aparecida* (Aparecida, Brazil: Fundacion Amerindia, 2007).

other ecclesial movements. This fusion may both increase the risk that the CEBs will lose their identity and (2) make it more difficult for them fully to discern the signs of the times.

NATIONAL MISSION AND INTO THE FUTURE

At Aparecida, the bishops agreed that each national church should prepare overviews of its mission, and that these would be renewed annually until the final national mission was developed in 2013. The intent of the bishops of Latin America was to read the signs of the times in the second decade of the 21st century, instead of merely responding to the issues of the mid-20th century. Some national churches responded vigorously to the Aparecida agreements, while others were less conscientious about them. A review and updating of mission statements would be extremely helpful to the church at this time.

Other less-than-fully resolved issues require clarification: current economic realities, educational inequalities, religious freedom,²⁴ matters of special interest to indigenous peoples and to African-Americans, and environmental issues, especially with regard to Antarctica and the Amazon rain forest. These are only a few of the challenges needing to be faced; many are too large in scope and too complex to be dealt with effectively by individual dioceses.

As the proceedings of CELAM V make clear, however, both the Latin American bishops and specialists from North America are keenly aware of these challenges, and close collaboration shows great promise for continued progress in reading the signs of the times ca. 2013. For example, CELAM invited US Bishops William Skylstad and Ricardo Ramirez, C.S.B., to participate at the Aparecida conference with full voice and vote—a clear recognition that all parts of the Americas have much to offer one another.

²⁴ See Jeffrey Gros, F.S.C., “The Challenge of Pluralism and Peace,” *International Review of Mission* 98 (2009) 342–59.