

# Episcopal Conferences Worldwide and Catholic Social Thought, in Theory and Praxis: An Update

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**Terence A. McGoldrick**

Providence College, RI

## Abstract

The article surveys the work of the world's episcopal conferences (ECs) on Catholic social thought (CST) over the past 15 years. This updates an earlier study on a century of the ECs' socioeconomic statements. After noting significant developments around the world, the article focuses on three countries of the Global South, showing a trend toward more social activism and fewer statements. It then argues that those developments not only refine CST but that CST cannot be understood apart from the communities that live it in theory and practice.

## Keywords

basic ecclesial communities, Catholic social movements, Catholic social thought, church social advocacy, episcopal conferences, faith-based initiatives, global Catholicism, liberation theology, new evangelization

In 1998 I published in this journal a summary of an interdisciplinary research project on a century of episcopal conferences' (ECs) statements on Catholic social thought (CST) worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Now, 15 years later, I am revisiting that

1. Terence McGoldrick, "Episcopal Conferences Worldwide on Catholic Social Teaching," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998) 22–50. I hope one day to digitize the 100-year collection of EC documents from that study and create a website, where the ongoing EC developments of CST may be freely accessed by scholars throughout the world.

## Corresponding author:

Terence A. McGoldrick

Email: [tmcgoldr@providence.edu](mailto:tmcgoldr@providence.edu)

research in light of subsequent developments. I will argue my theory that, generally, the ECs have become more sophisticated over the last 15 years:<sup>2</sup> with fewer statements and more activism, they have adopted a new and more effective model aimed at structural social transformation that combines theory and praxis. As Cardinal Orlando Quevedo, O.M.I., former president of the Philippine EC and former secretary general of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC), says, “From this dynamic interplay between the word of God and experience social teachings emerge and develop.”<sup>3</sup> There is no papal statement on the CST implications of tourism in Thailand (1990), of water as a human right in Bolivia (2003), the drug war in Mexico (2010), terrorism and human rights in Germany (2011), prisons in Australia (2011), or corruption in the Philippines (1989, 1997, 2003). However, the world’s ECs have treated all these subjects at length, as those churches daily confront and bear the burden of these social concerns. Critics lament that EC statements have had little effect.<sup>4</sup> Although on one level the claim seems indisputable, my article shows a complementary EC social activism operating below the surface and arising hand-in-glove out of locally applied CST.

I have chosen here to focus on the Global South, where the strict separation of church and state is viewed as an alien product of European and American history.<sup>5</sup> The ECs of this part of the world have been productively engaged in the Church’s social justice mission. This relatively narrow focus will allow me to speculate on the causes of this trend. At the same time, I will highlight the unique ways that the rest of the world’s ECs apply CST to their particular social issues in theory and practice.

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2. I say “my theory” because without the resources of the original multiyear European-funded interdisciplinary project with its international network of scholars and conferences, I cannot offer the same depth of analysis of the world’s 114 ECs, nor possibly recount all they are doing to apply CST. However, I can supply an overview of significant general trends, which I have been noting since 1998, as compared to a century of EC statements on CST.
  3. “Social Teachings and Social Transformation in CBCP Thought (1945–1995),” *Anamnesis*, ed. Francisco F. Claver, S.J., and Pedro C. Quitarioro III (Manila: Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, 1996) 1–107, at 3. As John Sniegocki explains in *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Globalization: The Quest for Alternatives* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 2009) 291–325, ECs have added refinement and depth to CST on subjects like women, the environment, structural analysis of capitalism, and the role of grassroots activism.
  4. E.g., Gregory Baum, Donal Dorr, Larry Rasmussen, David McLoughlin, Mary Hobgood, and Eloi Messi Metogo.
  5. Indian theologian Felix Wilfred articulates a new “public theology” that is interreligious, interdisciplinary, and organically engaged with the entire public sphere. Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (New Delhi: ISPCK 2010). See too Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical, 2010).

## New Trends, Constant Priorities

In the last 15 years, most of the world's ECs appear to have shifted emphasis from publishing statements to activism. Also, the role of the ECs is becoming more defined since Pope Paul VI mandated them; this is manifest particularly in their social justice undertakings. Finally, the spiritual message that has always distinguished EC statements has become stronger as the ECs herald the new evangelization urged by Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, as well as by two synods of bishops. As Stephen Bevans notes, a renewed evangelization cannot be reduced to social justice work, but it is a condition for its authenticity.<sup>6</sup>

A three-pronged, faith-based strategy continues to predominate in the Church's approach to social justice around the world: (1) social consciousness, (2) structural reform, and (3) participation. Statements intended to raise consciousness and set priorities are still essential, but a more practical emphasis has emerged through structural reform and participation. As part of the social fabric, the local church has come to recognize its effectiveness in new forms of orthopraxis, which it continues to evaluate and improve. Overall, activism in the form of commissions, lobbying governments, advocacy, community organizing, health care programs, basic ecclesial communities, peace-building, and so forth, has increased as the number of statements has fallen. There are some exceptions. In Poland, where the Church is taking a public role once denied by Communism, the number of statements has risen. But even in regions of the developed world, where activism has long been well organized, we see an increase. The US Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) expanded the Office of Migrants and Refugee Services, created the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change (2006), and the circle of protection with other churches to defend against federal budget cuts to programs for the poor (2011). UK bishops established a permanent parliament liaison office (2009), and the French bishops created Diaconia 2013, a three-year project to be a church in solidarity with the poor. Community-based activism realizes all three of the EC theological strategies to redress structures of sin, which can tangibly empower the local community in a lasting way. These are living examples of what Peter Phan calls "Christian social spirituality in history," actualized within the unity of contemplation and liberative action.<sup>7</sup>

My earlier study also revealed a consensus among the world's ECs that solidarity and responsibility, with more participation, was most needed. These two central themes of EC statements in the 100-year period after Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* continue to be a key part of the Church's critical assessment of social problems around the world. Community-based activism, facilitated by a more professionalized EC

6. Stephen B. Bevans, S.V.D., "Revisiting Mission at Vatican II, Theology and Practice for Today's Missionary Church," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 261–83. The theology of the Global South has rapidly become vast. Here I can give only a suggestion of local theologians' insights to acknowledge their part in the ECs' dialogue with the world.

7. Peter C. Phan, "Christian Social Spirituality: A Global Perspective," in *Catholic Social Justice, Theological and Practical Explorations*, ed. Philomena Cullen, Bernard Hoose, and Gerard Mannion (New York: Continuum, 2007) 18–40.

organization, is a new way that solidarity inspires grassroots coresponsibility for sustainable social transformation.

If CST faces different questions in different historical and cultural contexts, it is all the more true, as Paul VI often said, that a single universal teaching does not adequately apply to the particular situations of the many social complexities of a church that is more global than ever. Today the ECs serve to fill the gap between theory and praxis. They are refining and developing CST throughout the world, not so much by developing doctrine as by the trial and error that produces more tangible results and new perspectives toward social transformation. As the bishops of England and Wales courageously put it more than a decade ago, “As bishops we have the particular responsibility to discern and interpret the signs of the times, even on occasion at the risk of being wrong.”<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I survey the ways the world’s ECs have been contributing to social transformation these past 15 years and point out significant trends. I then look at CST elaborations since 1998 on three continents: Asia, Latin America, and Africa with case studies from one country in each continent.

## The Changing Role of EC Statements

In the past, a particular national crisis was often the reason for an EC statement. This is still the case today. The earthquake and tsunami in Japan, for instance, evoked an EC statement calling attention to the rights of the 100,000 victims as well as advocating replacement of all 54 nuclear power plants in the country (2011).<sup>9</sup> EC statements are often one-page statements that appear before a crucial election, as was the case in the Philippines (1998, 2004, 2006) or in Columbia after the assassination of Cali’s Archbishop Isaiás Duarte (2002).

On the other hand, major issues have prompted longer, more substantive statements. Climate change provoked this kind of response from the bishops of New Zealand (2006), the United States (2001), Bolivia (2012), and South Africa (2011). The 2008 global financial crisis spurred statements from ECs all over the world. The European Bishops Conference (COMECE), for example, took a step back to ask fundamental questions about economies in modern societies. Its 25-page statement, *A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility* (2012), applies CST to the EU project of a competitive social economy, exploring private initiatives and a culture of solidarity.<sup>10</sup> It also looks for ways to make the free-market system more humane and ecologically accountable.

Along with its statement on the modern market economy, COMECE has written on global governance, immigration, religious freedom, culture, and climate change. Article 17 of the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon (forming the constitutional basis of the European Union) mandated “open, transparent and regular dialogue” between the

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8. EC of England and Wales, *The Common Good and the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, October 21, 1996, <http://www.ccspm.org/document.doc?id=99>. All URLs cited herein were accessed January 12, 2014.

9. See <http://www.cbcj.catholic.jp/eng/edoc/111108.htm>.

10. See <http://www.comece.org/site/en/publications>.

European Union and its churches; since then COMECE, in partnership with its Protestant equivalent, the Conference of European Churches (CEC), has had a significant impact on EU policy decisions. It could be argued that no EC in the world has more political influence than COMECE; unique among ECs, it has a seat at the table in policy decisions, not as another NGO, but as a church that represents a social group of the EU citizenry. As a result, political dialogue and policy has become its primary focus. COMECE has partnered with the Jesuit European Social Center to engage its expertise. Various European ECs have been heavily engaged in shaping the EU project, from its inception, with Christian values.<sup>11</sup>

Another response to the economic crisis was Spain's 2009 plenary assembly Statement on the Economic and Moral Crisis, which blames irresponsible fiscal structures as much as greed for Spain's economic woes.<sup>12</sup> The Spanish bishops add the faith perspective that these analyses usually offer and that distinguishes them from sociology: "Above all, the crisis should help us make God our reference for the veracity of our actions and attitudes."<sup>13</sup> They go on to appeal for the recognition of suffering fellow citizens and emphasize that any blueprint for a lasting solution must be based on integral development and moral reform.

In recent years ECs have stressed conversion and evangelization as a remedy aimed at the root of social problems. The evangelization of culture is often integrated in the EC statements with social issues in appeals for conversion and in building a culture of life. Evangelization has twice been a theme of the Synod of Bishops (2008 and 2012) and of plenary assemblies in Spain (2012), CELAM (2007), Japan (2012), FABC (2012), and Australia (2012), to name a few. The primary task of the Philippine bishops' nine-year era of new evangelization through the year 2021 (the Philippine church's 500th anniversary) is social transformation.<sup>14</sup> Still more telling, evangelization is the main thrust of the Mexican bishops' (CEM) strategy to combat the drug wars that have plagued Mexico since 1989. In two successive statements the bishops criticize dysfunctional social structures as well as the inhumanity of those responsible for the crimes. The first statement, *Only in Christ, Our Peace, Does Mexico Have a Dignified Life* (2010), lays out a master plan of specific strategies and commitments. The commitments comprise about half of the statement; the other half proposes the integral formation of the person as foundational for peace. The statement ends with an appeal to criminals for conversion.<sup>15</sup> The second statement, *Educating for a New Society*, was

11. Linda Hogan and John D'Arcy May, "Social Ethics in Western Europe," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 154–73. For COMECE statements on the EU project beginning in 1997 see <http://www.comece.org/site/en/publications>.

12. See <http://www.conferenciaepiscopal.es/index.php/documentos-plenaria>.

13. *Ibid.* no. 8.

14. "CBCP Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization (Longer Version)," 2012, <http://rcald.org/?p=659>.

15. *Que en Cristo Nuestra Paz, México Tenga Vida Digna* (2010), Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, [http://www.cem.org.mx/i/uploads/Que\\_en\\_Cristo\\_nuestra\\_paz\\_MAxico\\_tenga\\_vida\\_digna.doc\\_.pdf](http://www.cem.org.mx/i/uploads/Que_en_Cristo_nuestra_paz_MAxico_tenga_vida_digna.doc_.pdf). Throughout this article these texts are my translations, unless one exists in English, as is the case for the CELAM statements.

released after the CEM's 92nd plenary session. It seeks a partnership with parents, the state, and the church to counter the culture of death with a culture of life.<sup>16</sup> It is an educative process, the bishops say, that finds "values, life, family and the respect for the common good, and ecology in the very heart of the Gospel."<sup>17</sup> Both of these lengthy CEM statements emphasize concrete, faith-inspired action to foster moral change rather than simply decry injustice.

The recognition of the global nature of social problems has inspired increased intercontinental collaboration. Since 2008 the EC presidents of all G-8 nations have written a joint letter to their nations' leaders on the occasion of the G-8 summit. Their first such letter voices concerns for the undue burden borne by the poor, who are victims of international problems like food crises and climate change. The letter stresses aid commitments and "issues of critical importance to human life and dignity" in the name of the "global common good."<sup>18</sup>

There have been more such joint intercontinental statements; the bishops of Latin America and Europe call for a globalization that produces "a global society more humane and in solidarity" instead of merely a global market (2002). Intercontinental collaboration by the world's ECs has evolved beyond particular statements to working groups on world issues. The Symposium of the European and African bishops was created in 2004 for "pastoral solidarity." The German and African bishops also meet regularly and issue statements on common problems, such as the plight of refugees (2011). *Strangers No Longer*, a joint statement on migration by the bishops of Mexico and the United States, appeared in 2003 after many months of hearings.<sup>19</sup> The US and Mexican bishops have met every year since to coordinate tactics on migrant workers and related issues and have expanded the meeting to include all Central American ECs.

The work of applying the gospel to modern life remains a great challenge. The ECs continue to use statements as a strategy to promote integral development, to formulate policy, promulgate the teaching, and resist powerful social factions and governments. However, statements have more and more become only one piece of the strategy. A national or regional consensus, with permanent offices and specialized expertise, in communion with the local people of God and their leaders, enables the church to be more organized today than ever. The high level of organization and coordination serves to counterbalance powers of the modern nation-states and, of equal importance, helps manage the complexity and flow of local social issues today that are beyond the ability of bishops acting individually.

Today's social issues must be met on many fronts: policy, raising consciousness, coordinating programs, education, funding, lobbying, advocacy, and so forth. A national or continental organization allows for a more focused activism and a more effective strategy for structural and sustainable justice. This is different from the centuries of

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16. See <http://www.americalatina.va/content/americalatina/es/secciones/documentos>.

17. *Ibid.* 33.

18. See [http://old.usccb.org/sdwp/international/2008\\_g8\\_letter.pdf](http://old.usccb.org/sdwp/international/2008_g8_letter.pdf).

19. See <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm>.

efforts dedicated to missionary activity, education, and relief to the suffering that characterized the Church's social mission in the past. This new approach enables a more adapted and unified response to particular social problems and provides necessary support for small grassroots initiatives. It refines the understanding of CST as it is applied. The future of social Catholicism, observes John Coleman, depends on social institutions to carry it forward; ECs are one such institutional carrier throughout the world.<sup>20</sup>

## Statements Yield to Activism

Globally, the number of EC statements has significantly decreased since 1998. For example, statements on CST by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) dropped from an average of 2.1 per year over the 1990s to 1.5 per year from 2000 to 2012. After the 1992 Plenary Council of the Philippines' (PCP-II) plan of action following the Marcos dictatorship, there was a surge in lengthy statements, but the CBCP is now typically issuing one-page statements that focus on particular issues or events like housing, the elections, nuclear power plants, and tax law. These are more like calls to action or position statements than in-depth teaching statements.<sup>21</sup> In the past 12 years, these brief statements by the CBCP have appeared at about twice the rate of the longer statements (2.8 vs. 1.5 per year). They indicate trust and cooperation among the bishops and the EC president and staff, after decades of contending on these sensitive social issues. They do not require a plenary meeting or consultative process and allow the Church to have a voice in the regular flow of events in local society.

This trend is also evident in Africa, where 43 percent of all 207 CST EC statements issued in the century after *Rerum novarum* came in the 1980s. The EC of a particular African country is more likely to write a brief statement on a particular issue and leave deeper CST analysis to the African continental EC, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), or regional ECs such as the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).

In Latin America, Colombia issued 5.25 statements per year from 2000 to 2004 and only 1.5 per year over the following nine years. The bishops of Columbia have been important mediators of peace and reconciliation in Colombia's 60-year civil war. Statements are one part of their larger effort to facilitate lasting peace, focusing on such matters as fostering dialogue between belligerents, restitution of lost property, democracy, and public policy.<sup>22</sup>

20. John A. Coleman, "The Future of Catholic Social Thought," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes (Washington: Georgetown University, 2005) 522–44.

21. I have bracketed these brief statements from the above statistics because they are a subset of a new kind of document that significantly differs from earlier substantial statements counted in the original study, such as CBCP's 1989 document, *Thou Shalt Not Steal*. The original project excluded statements on subjects like AIDS, abortion, marriage, and condom use because they were not related to socioeconomics.

22. For a more scholarly appraisal, refer to the University of Notre Dame's Catholic Peace Building Network at [www.cpn.nd.edu](http://www.cpn.nd.edu).

The decline in the number of statements in recent decades is also due to opposition in some quarters of the Catholic hierarchy. I personally heard Belgian Cardinal Jan Schotte say publicly in 2000, while he was secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, that bishops were writing too many documents. In the 1980s and 1990s, the peak years, about 200 EC statements were appearing annually worldwide.

Most Western European ECs are now issuing statements on social justice at less than half their former rates. Germany, for example, went from 17 social justice statements in the 1970s to seven in the 2000s. Since 2000, the German bishops issued only four substantial joint ecumenical statements—on religious freedom, democracy, agriculture, and pensions—whereas 1997 alone saw three. Instead of national statements, the French and German bishops have more often opted for more targeted studies and messages posted on their websites by scholars or individual bishops, covering numerous social justice topics such as the 2008 economic crisis, pensions, youth unemployment, and relations with Muslims.<sup>23</sup>

ECs of the recent Eastern democracies such as Belarus, Poland, and the Czech Republic have held to the earlier strategy of plenary assemblies and issuing lengthy statements. In recent decades these ECs have addressed issues such as corruption, the media, and poverty. The Church in Poland, for example, beginning in the late 1990s, has been trying to influence the country's new national identity, after the demise of Communism, by consistently issuing two or three statements on social justice per year. In the early years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Polish bishops pointed out the legacy of Communism's national debt and endorsed the public burning of all secret police files as a way to forget the past. They went on to decry the new reality of unemployment and the unevenly shared burdens of transforming their economy.<sup>24</sup> They called for a new democracy that is not only "procedural" but also dedicated to the poor and the common good, and they cautioned against the dangers of the modern media, corruption, and misguided "patriotic attitudes."<sup>25</sup> More recent statements have turned to issues of family and education.<sup>26</sup>

The success of the Brazilian Conference's Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), which, with ecumenical participation, began in 1975 on behalf of Amazonian rural workers and quickly expanded to every diocese in Brazil, is an example of the broad impact an EC can have toward unifying church policy and activism. The CPT has an estimated two million members in Brazil today,<sup>27</sup> and its community-organizing model

23. For example, under episcopal documents are reports by scholars on particular current issues: <http://www.eglise.catholique.fr/conference-des-veques-de-france/publications/documents-episcopat/2013>, and [www.dbk.de/en/home](http://www.dbk.de/en/home).

24. Word on Some Social Problems, December 17, 2000, [http://episkopat.pl/dokumenty/listy\\_pasterskie](http://episkopat.pl/dokumenty/listy_pasterskie).

25. Ibid.

26. E.g., Family, School and Sobriety, [http://episkopat.pl/dokumenty/listy\\_pasterskie](http://episkopat.pl/dokumenty/listy_pasterskie).

27. For a history of the CPT and the Brazilian Church's role in land reform, where a theology of land is being written, see Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingermer, "Living the Faith to Arrive in the Promised Land: A Theological-Pastoral Reflection on Brazil in the Past Forty Years," *Communio viatorum* 46 (2004) 63–89. More information can be found on the CPT website: <http://www.cptnacional.org.br>.



is now used throughout Latin America. The CPT uses mostly volunteer activism in the form of basic ecclesial communities (BECs), legal advice for farmers, unions, agronomists, and advocacy—often in the face of violent resistance. In recent years, the CPT has also become the protector of the Indian minorities of Brazil and has focused on the core issues of child and slave labor, the human right to water, the environment, fishing rights, land sharing, and the genetically modified foods debate. In 2012 the 50th General Assembly of the Brazilian EC (CNBB) voted to assess and issue a statement on the agrarian social question in Brazil. With the public support of the CNBB as part of a national strategy, the CPT has been more effective than a typical NGO.

Statements still have their place, but across the world, a more pastoral, pragmatic, and locally appropriate approach to social injustices is overtaking grand statements. Small Christian Communities (SCCs), which include Catholic social movements as well as BECs, have proven to be a key part of the story. From his many years working with SCCs in the Philippines, Bishop Francisco Claver, S.J., believes SCCs naturally evolve from being chiefly liturgical groups (prayer) to being more developmental (see and judge) and liberative (act for structural change), with each phase incorporating and building upon the previous one.<sup>28</sup> The rise in EC-sponsored social activism is not only a top-down phenomenon; it just includes action from the margins, in a process that began decades ago with grassroots organization inspired by Catholic social movements around the world. Dictators in the Global South sometimes abetted the process. Claver recounts how decades of martial law united the bishops of the Philippines, facilitating their national pastoral plan, PCP-II's grand strategy for social transformation. He summarizes the historic meeting's resolve to become a truly participative church of solidarity, working together for the common good, with a social agenda that he believes is best accomplished through BECs.<sup>29</sup> Since then, the CBCP has repeatedly enlisted grassroots "circles of discernment" and BECs to fight corruption and advocate for social transformation.<sup>30</sup> Brazil is another case in point, where a long dictatorship played its part in focusing local ecclesial activism and unity (I treat this below).

More activism is not only to be found in the Global South. Already highly organized conferences, like the USCCB, have added offices in the last decade to expand their social justice activities. Ten of the USCCB's 33 offices can be categorized as

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28. See Francisco F. Claver, *The Making of a Local Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) chap. 7 on the natural evolution of BECs. Joseph Healy, M.M., believes that evolution to activism depends on whether those involved use the see-judge-act methodology (Joseph G. Healey, M.M., *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa* [published as an eBook on his Small Christian Communities website, <http://smallchristiancommunities.org>] 200).
29. Claver, *Making of a Local Church* 175–77. See too Cardinal Quevedo's assessment of BEC's in the Philippines in his address to the 2002 national consultation: "Notes on BECs and the Church of the Future," <http://cbcpec.com/?p=147>.
30. See CBCP, *Seeking the Truth, Restoring Integrity* (2008), <http://cbcwebsite.com/2000s/2008/seeking.html>; *God Hears the Cry of the Poor* (2009), <http://cbcwebsite.com/2000s/2009/godhears.html>; and *Transforming Election through Solidarity of Consciences* (2010), <http://cbcwebsite.com/2010s/2010Docs/coming.html>.

social justice missions. In the last ten years, the USCCB has issued over 50 statements on a wide range of social justice topics, including the war in Iraq, the elderly, climate change, domestic violence, global solidarity with Africa, and socially responsible investments of securities.<sup>31</sup> To the disappointment of many, the USCCB could not get a two-thirds majority in November 2012 to pass a motion to write a national economic pastoral letter like the 1986 Economic Justice for All, largely due to concerns about partisan politics.<sup>32</sup> The USCCB is in some ways a model of professional, top-down activism, with a sophisticated multifaceted approach to social justice issues. However, it is far behind the Global South in Small Church Community (SCC) activism. Organizational prowess aside, it is hard to compare them with bishops of the Global South, who are sometimes faced with threats of violence and hostile governments yet do not shy away from speaking on behalf of the oppressed.

The reason for the decline in the number of statements globally is not that the bishops imagine any less that it is their prophetic duty to speak for the voiceless. Instead statements have become more organically integrated with the social fabric as one part of the struggle. The ECs today are more occupied with a pastoral activism directed toward integral development and rely more on coresponsible participation in solidarity than on statements. This trend side-steps questions raised about the magisterial authority of EC statements.<sup>33</sup> The ECs are not trying to rewrite doctrine. Their statements, like their social justice mission, are pastoral, in tune with events and the lived reality of its people. And yet, despite their success, at times tension may arise if the bishops feel their social activists are imposing an agenda upon them, as occurred in recent years with the French National Pastoral Service to Migrants.<sup>34</sup>

A different world is possible, Jon Sobrino writes, when prophecy and utopia become dynamics of the same process and begin to replace a civilization of wealth with a civilization of gospel poverty in the spirit of Jesus. He believes “dia-praxis” and “dialogue” are the way those who share that vision can humanize the axis of values upon

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31. Such statements can be found at <http://www.usccb.org/about/index.cfm> and <http://old.usccb.org/sdwp/national/index.shtml>.

32. See discussion by Grant Gallicho in *Commonweal*'s blog “The Ghosts of Economic Justice for All (part 2),” <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/ghosts-economic-justice-all-part-ii>. Archbishop Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., also speculates about new issues to be addressed; see his “American Pastoral, Revisiting Economic Justice for All,” <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/american-pastoral>.

33. The status of ECs' magisterial authority turns on the controversial idea of their place as living representations of the mystery of the Church as *communio*. See: Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., “The Teaching Authority of Episcopal Conferences,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 472–93. Avery Dulles, Ladislav Orsy, Michael Fahey, and James Provost all discuss the theological aspects of this question in *Episcopal Conferences: Historical, Canonical, and Theological Studies*, ed. Thomas J. Reese, S.J. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1989) part III.

34. Stéphane Joulain, M.Afr., “Engagement de l'Église et des ONG auprès des migrants,” recounts this history: [http://www.clc-europe.org/d\\_projects/docsMigration/Lille\\_Engagement\\_Eglise\\_ONG.pdf](http://www.clc-europe.org/d_projects/docsMigration/Lille_Engagement_Eglise_ONG.pdf).

which the world turns.<sup>35</sup> Statements express the Church's shared vision, and for that reason they will always be necessary. Because they are written from common trials of injustice and from the battle to transform its causes, EC statements sharpen the focus of eschatological hope by prophetically critiquing the status quo. Statements and praxis each gives life to the other; their symbiosis makes them most effective.

I now consider case studies from three continents in context to elaborate the ways this broadening activism is being played out in the people of God's struggle to transform their societies in the Global South.

## Asia (India as Case Study)

The Church of Asia's priority for the poor, which has been evident since it began publishing statements across that vast continent, has not abated in the last 15 years. *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA) devotes its entire chapter 4 to human development strategies and CST.<sup>36</sup> The Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) was very experienced in treating all of EA's pastoral priorities. Since its founding in 1971, the FABC has deeply influenced Asian theological reflection and praxis, and its statements have had a "compelling power" for social transformation.<sup>37</sup> Indian Jesuit Michael Amaladoss summarizes Asian theology as generally less interested in abstract theory, preferring contextual dialogue with living culture, the suffering, and Asia's religions.<sup>38</sup> This perspective is evident in the FABC as well as in every EC of Asia. Felix Wilfred believes a new model of ecclesiology is being written today in India and Asia that is different from that of Latin American SCCs because people of different religions are joined by commitment to justice, service, and sacrifice in the struggle to make the world better.<sup>39</sup> The FABC bishops envision one community of life as the fruit of integral development and

35. Jon Sobrino, "Epilogue: 'Turning Back History,'" *Concilium* 5 (2004) 125–33.

36. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents).

37. More than 30 doctoral dissertations have been written on the FABC. Its influence and organization, including several offices and programs for social justice, are explained in Bernardus Rukiyanto, S.J., "A New Way of Being Church: A Study of Inculturation in the Church of Asia and the Church of Indonesia; A Roman Catholic Perspective" (Ph.D. dissertation, Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, MA, 2007) chap. 2.

38. John C. England et al., eds., *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources*, vol. 1, *Asia Region, South Asia, Austral Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) xv–xvi. See also Edmund Chia, "Asian Christianity: The Postcolonial Challenge of Identity and Theology," *Compass* 46.1 (2012) 9–13.

39. Felix Wilfred, "Action Groups and the Struggle for Justice in India: Ecclesiological Implications," *Ecumenical Review* 39 (1987) 291–309. See Wilfred's important study, 23 years later, of public theology as true and transforming religious pluralism: *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (New Delhi: ISPCK 2010) chap. 20. For a historical-theological study and American perspective on the difficult balance of Christians' engagement with politics in the modern world, see Kenneth R. Himes, *Christianity and the Political Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2013).

dialogue with the whole of creation, uniting the diverse peoples of Asia in dignity and compassion.

At its sixth plenary assembly (FABC VI) in 1995, the FABC looked back on its 25 years of apostolate. The Catholic Church's unique contribution, they say, has come from Christian spirituality walking in compassion and humility with all the peoples of Asia "as they struggle and suffer for a better human life."<sup>40</sup> They surmise that the overall thrust of these years of addressing social and economic concerns has been to motivate the churches of Asia to be a "new way of being Church" that is committed to becoming a "community of communities" and a "credible sign of salvation and liberation."<sup>41</sup> And yet they humbly confess that despite truly remarkable advances, these goals are still far from being realized. The FABC has denounced forces of death at work in Asia over the years: a global economy ruled by market forces to the detriment of peoples' real needs, the vulnerability of migrants and refugees, and the suffering of exploited workers, especially children. The FABC VI statement declares, "For us to live is to live with integrity and dignity, in peace and justice, in freedom and participation, in mutuality and complementarity. It is to live in simplicity and friendship."<sup>42</sup> The statement describes a mission of solidarity with suffering humanity that stems from an authentic solidarity with the Trinity in prayer, because this will "strike a chord in the heart of Asia where traditions of spirituality and prayer abound."<sup>43</sup> The statement exemplifies the Asian church's new way of being church—in dialogue with the poor, other religions, and culture.<sup>44</sup>

The most recent FABC plenary statement (2012) exemplifies the world trend of emphasizing the importance of moral conversion and spirituality for social transformation. During the year of faith (October 11, 2012, to November 24, 2013, decreed by Benedict XVI), the bishops exhorted the Church to be a "Christ-experiencing and Christ-witnessing community," committed to dialogue, humility, prophetic denouncing of injustice, solidarity, care for creation, and bold witness of faith inspired by the Asian martyrs.<sup>45</sup> In a world where the Catholic Church is usually a small minority, activism speaks louder than statements. The FABC's office for human development (OHD) was founded in 1971, at the FABC's inception, to foster social action. Its programs, which often directly engage the bishops, target common issues such as migrants, women, slum-dwellers, farmers, and ecology.<sup>46</sup> The OHD's practical theology in dialogue goes on to impact the various Asian countries by sending informed leaders back to their respective communities.

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40. FABC, *Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life*, Sixth Plenary Assembly, January 10–19, 1995, Manila, Philippines, Final Statement 3, [http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc\\_paper\\_74.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_74.pdf).

41. *Ibid.*

42. See [http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc\\_paper\\_74.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_74.pdf), 85.

43. *Ibid.* 14.1.

44. This frequent theme can be seen, e.g., in the message of FABC VII, [http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc\\_paper\\_95.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_95.pdf).

45. Message of FABC, 10th Plenary Assembly, December 16, 2012, [http://www.fabc.org/index\\_10th\\_plenary.html](http://www.fabc.org/index_10th_plenary.html).

46. The FABC publishes a newsletter with scholarly articles explaining its activities since 1999, [www.fabc.org/offices/ohd/newsletter.html](http://www.fabc.org/offices/ohd/newsletter.html).

Acknowledging that the Philippine and Korean churches are leaders in activism with robust SCCs employing sophisticated social justice offices and programs, which I cannot detail here, let me turn to the Church of India as a case in point.

In 1989, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) created a permanent office, the Commission for Justice Peace and Development (CJPD). CJPD has a political lobby, provides oversight for development projects in liaison with its dioceses, investigates social issues for policy decisions, and performs a host of other functions. The CBCI also has offices dedicated to advocacy and programs on behalf of labor (est. 1971), women (est. 1992), and “backward classes” (so-called in India’s constitution) and tribal peoples (est. 2006). In 1990, the result of their meeting was not to write another statement on the urgent needs of health care in India, but to create a commission for health care. That office collaborates with the Catholic Health Association of India’s 3351 health-care institutions and now promotes access to health care as a human right and therapies that are consistent with the Catholic ethic of life. It also collaborates with the Protestant churches in a Healing Ministry Week across the country, a week that through numerous events focuses on prayer, health-care issues, the suffering of the sick, and health awareness.

The CJPD sponsors an awareness program that conducts workshops on CST throughout the country for church and community leaders. It also runs a “Right to Food” campaign it began in 2008, which has numerous strategies to get food to the poor, especially in rural areas. It has created peace clubs in schools to promote a culture of peace. In 2003, it instituted a program of social advocacy that included analysis, the documentation of abuses, and training. They did this with the help of the Catholic NGO, the Asian Center for the Progress of Peoples. The CJPD organizes “Justice Sunday,” when the entire Indian Church reflects on themes of social justice and the national priority to make the Indian Catholic Church a prophetic church that advocates for the poor and marginalized.

Along with a new emphasis on social activism, ECs are also finding ways to use the Internet, including social media, to promote social change and as a means of communicating their teachings and evangelizing message. The CBCI website gets over one million hits per year. There is also considerable material support for CBCI advocacy from Catholic aid organizations such as the US bishops’ Catholic Relief Services and the German bishops’ MISEREOR, which have funded about 160 projects per year this past decade in India alone, mostly through Caritas India.

Not wishing to “rest on their laurels” in health care, education, and development, the Indian bishops set out a plan of pastoral action for CST in 2012, as the final statement of their 30th plenary meeting: *The Church’s Role for a Better India*.<sup>47</sup> It promotes greater activism on a broad range of social issues, from legal advocacy for the poor to peace-building and environmental initiatives. It calls for decisive collaboration of the laity and concludes with a reminder that prayer and the spirit of service exemplified by Mother Theresa are essential to realizing their goals.

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47. See [http://www.syromalabarchurch.in/document\\_details.php?res=18](http://www.syromalabarchurch.in/document_details.php?res=18).

## Africa (Kenya as Case Study)

John Paul II's postsynodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), was enthusiastically received as a plan of action, resulting in various programs and initiatives.<sup>48</sup> There had been pastoral plans before, but the African bishops agreed that implementation had been a persistent problem, which explains the practical emphasis of the African Jubilee Synod. Called "the conscience of society" by two Kenyan presidents, the bishops have a larger moral voice in Africa than in the developed world.<sup>49</sup>

Justice, peace, and reconciliation were the major themes of the 2009 Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. To promote these themes, the synod emphasized the need for "pastoral solidarity" and charged the ECs with "greater solidarity in action at all levels."<sup>50</sup> It mandated that Justice and Peace Commissions be created in every diocese of Africa, with the goal eventually to have JPCs in every parish. Akintunde Akinade and Vandana Shiva are examples of a rising chorus of intellectuals from the developing world who reject Western models of economic growth.<sup>51</sup> Alternatively, Africa's ECs and theologians have proposed a communitarian version animated by Christian love; Nigeria's Kenneth Obiekwe insists that "community is the heart of African culture" and the key to understanding African anthropology.<sup>52</sup> African *palaver* theology is born from that anthropology. It is dialogical, anamnestic, trinitarian, and therapeutic in a culture in which the individual is unable to stand alone and remain human.<sup>53</sup> Parish devotional groups and other forms of SCCs are a significant way the African Church lives solidarity in action. There are over 120,000 SCCs in the central African countries alone.<sup>54</sup>

In a recent statement (2013), the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) identifies governance as one of the most pressing problems for Africa as a continent. Ethnic violence, war, and corruption plague a large

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48. Peter Lwaminda, "How Has the 'Ecclesia in Africa' Made a Difference in the AMECEA Region with Respect to Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace?," *African Ecclesial Review* 51 (2009) 216–41.
  49. Rodrigo Mejia, *The Conscience of Society: The Social Teaching of the Catholic Bishops of Kenya, 1960–1995* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1995).
  50. The synod is cited in Benedict XVI's *Africae munus* nos.105–6; see also *ibid.* no. 10 where the bishops call for transforming theology into pastoral care and a very concrete ministry.
  51. A CST perspective of Shiva's ideas can be found in Sniegocki, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Globalization* chap. 5.
  52. Kenneth Obiekwe, "Jesus' Liberation Strategy: A Model for Africa's Emancipation," *African Ecclesial Review* 54 (2012) 121–48.
  53. See Bénédet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: Crossroad 2001); and Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2004) 159–61.
  54. See Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, eds., *Small Christian Communities Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2005). The regional EC is the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).

number of African countries as they struggle to create real democracies. This particular letter, an 18-page exhortation to responsible leadership, concludes with commitments to intensify sociopolitical ministry, monitor elections, and augment spiritual and ethical formation programs.<sup>55</sup> Cameroon's Eloi Messi Metogo, O.P., faults the African bishops, whose "fierce pastoral letters" are futile against corruption, human rights violations, and other abuses because the letters are unknown to the public and ignored by the authorities.<sup>56</sup> He also denounces any compromise between religion and political power because church leaders do not denounce their ambiguous relationships with circles of power, nor do they do enough in protest.<sup>57</sup> However, as Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, S.J., indicates, the bishops have been key players in the implementation and reception of Vatican II in Africa, and this continues with advocacy for social justice.<sup>58</sup> The impact of the bishops has been substantial in dealing with refugees and peace-building.<sup>59</sup> A dramatic example akin to the Philippine Church's people-power revolution occurred when the bishops of Malawi in 1993 had a letter, "Living in Our Faith," read in churches throughout the country. The letter was a catalyst for widespread protests that were vital toward peacefully ending President Joyce Banda's 30-year dictatorship.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, as Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magessa points out, more could be done in seminary training, funding for diocesan programs, and

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55. SECAM, *Governance, Common Good and Democratic Transition in Africa* (February 2013), <http://mafrsaprovince.com/2013/02/20/governance-the-common-good-and-democratic-transitions-in-africa>.
56. Eloi Messi Metogo, "God on the Side of Justice and the Poor?," *Concilium* 5 (2004) 77–82.
57. Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya makes the same complaint concerning Asia: "Benedict XVI's *Deus caritas est* and Social Action," in *Catholic Social Justice, Practical and Theological Explorations*, ed. Philomena Cullen, Bernard Hoose, and Gerard Mannion (New York: Continuum 2007) 41–62. See too Orobator's more nuanced analysis, "Church, State, and Catholic Ethics: The Kenyan Dilemma," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009) 182–85.
58. Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, S.J., "'After All, Africa Is Largely a Nonliterate Continent': The Reception of Vatican II in Africa," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 284–301. He makes the same point regarding the effectiveness of faith-based NGOs' collaboration with local church communities to assist African refugees: "Key Ethical Issues in the Practices and Policies of Refugee-Serving NGOs and Churches," in *Refugee Rights, Ethics, Advocacy, and Africa*, ed. David Hollenbach S.J. (Washington: Georgetown 2008) chap. 13. See too Odumaro Mubangizi, "Agent of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: The Church in Africa in an Era of Globalization," in *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace, the Second African Synod*, ed. A. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011) 105–15.
59. See David Hollenbach, S.J., ed., *Refugee Rights: Ethics, Advocacy, and Africa* (Washington: Georgetown University 2008) chap. 3; and R. Scott Appleby, Robert J. Schreiter, and Gerard F. Powers, eds., *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010).
60. Boniface Dulani, "Nurtured from the Pulpit: The Emergence and Growth of Malawi's Democracy Movement," in *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa*, ed. Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel (Leiden: Brill 2009) 138–55.

catechesis for governance and justice to implement CST.<sup>61</sup> Forty-five African countries have ECs. I cannot summarize all they are doing. Instead, I look at Kenya, keeping in mind that to do justice to all that the Church does to apply CST in Kenya alone would fill several volumes.

Kenya's EC (KCCB) is now divided into 15 commissions, including several that could be classified as pertaining to social justice (Refugees, Justice and Peace, Health, Family Life, Development and Social Services). They collaborate with Caritas Kenya, the KCCB's social development arm. Here too, the EC has become more specialized, adding or expanding permanent commissions in recent years that target a range of social issues on many fronts. For example, the Commission for Health was founded in 1957 and was expanded in the late 1990s to deal with AIDS. In 2010, it was again expanded to coordinate the Church's 446 health-care units with programs, funding, lobbying, and advocacy. The KCCB has a Parliament liaison, constitutional reform programs, and conflict resolution programs, and it works throughout the Kenyan dioceses to raise consciousness on peace and social justice issues.

In 1993, Nairobi's Cardinal Maurice Michael Otunga placed the KCCB's annual Lenten campaigns under the auspices of Justice and Peace. By preaching and mobilizing Kenya's more than 45,000 SCCs, these six-week Lenten campaigns have addressed famine and food insecurity, governance, environmental care, healing and reconciliation, and insecurity. Healey describes how SCCs experienced a paradigm shift from prayer groups to action groups throughout Eastern Africa after the 2009 Second African Synod. He supplies case studies of the SCCs' increased involvement in promoting justice, peace, and reconciliation in Kenyan parishes.<sup>62</sup> In recent years SCCs were also mobilized for a seven-year tree-planting and environmental care campaign, for monitoring elections and for civic education that attempts to put the common good above tribal loyalties. The SCCs are a product of the "African family of God" ecclesiology, a communion of communities, prominent in the African synods.<sup>63</sup>

Ethnic violence—the Kenyan bishops call it "the disease of tribalism"—often manipulated by politicians, is one of the most serious social problems in Kenya. A peace-building program was begun in 2007, after the country's deadly and tribally motivated election violence claimed over 1,000 lives. The KCCB had a role in authoring the country's new constitution (2010), which they supported with a brief statement inaugurating that year's Lenten campaign entitled, "The Dawn of New Hope."<sup>64</sup> Although unable to ensure constitutional protections for the unborn, the KCCB considered the new constitution a vital step toward a rule of law that "promotes life, equality, and dignity for every person in this country."<sup>65</sup>

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61. Laurenti Magesa in an email to me, commenting on an earlier version of this essay.

62. Healey, *Building the Church* chap. 5.

63. See, e.g., Donatus Oluwa Chukwa, *The Church as the Extended Family of God: Toward a New Direction for African Ecclesiology* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2011).

64. At <http://www.cjpckkenya.org/index.php?page=other&gid=31>.

65. *Ibid.*



The KCCB, like many African countries, prefers brief statements on specific events or problems with practical steps and leaves loftier CST theoretical analysis to Africa's continental (SECAM) and regional ECs (IMBISA, CERAO, CERNA, and AMECEA). Kenya issued only four EC statements before 1990, all fewer than ten pages in length. Between 2008 and 2013, the KCCB issued seven one- to two-page statements on CST; four concerned the new constitution and ethnic violence. Rather than a statement on the evils of corruption, the KCCB's six brief pastoral statements in 2012 tell stories of corruption with the see-judge-act methodology, featuring local experiences of corruption and suggestions for ways to fight against it. This is a more pastorally effective means to fight corruption than theological analysis. However, a crisis will still be an occasion for national statements; for example, a joint statement by the churches of Kenya deploring tribal violence between Christians and Muslims that left 100 people dead was issued in 2012 within weeks of the tragedy. It calls upon the government to forestall violence by promoting education, health, and fair wages.

The Kenyan EC made its 2013 Lenten Campaign theme "United and Peaceful Kenya . . . The Change I Want to See" in anticipation of the spring elections that all feared could again turn violent. After the peaceful elections, which had the greatest voter turnout in the nation's history, the bishops issued a brief statement on the state of the nation. It supported the new constitution's strong governance structures and decentralization, which the KCCB promised to monitor in the fight against corruption. It backed the new government's support of its role in education, but it opposed nationalization of church property, paralyzing conflicts in Parliament, and new consumption taxes. That same year, to promote constitutional reforms, the KCCB, under the auspices of the CJPC, also created programs for governance and democracy and for transformative civic education.

Magesa writes that in its 100-year history, despite the evils of imperialism, the great legacy of Christianity in Kenya consists in the advances it achieved in education, health, and reconciliation between fiercely antagonistic tribes to whom the Church tirelessly taught that all are one family in Christ. The Church's challenge for the future, he says, is to affirm a theology from below and to be a church of the people.<sup>66</sup> The pragmatic emphasis found in the recent African synods has been a major African focus for decades as it applies CST. African theologian Stan Chu Ilo writes that episcopal statements' commitment to the poor can be sacramentalized in Africa by "transformational praxis," which draws from a trinitarian solidarity that builds a true community of love in Christ.<sup>67</sup> The deeply communitarian nature of African culture and ecclesiology provides a unity of faith and life that is fertile ground for church grassroots social initiatives and advocacy. The case of Kenya gives a new understanding to my article of 15 years ago, which concluded that education was the predominant promotional

66. Laurenti Magesa, "Overview of 100 years of Catholicism in Kenya," *African Ecclesial Review* 32 (1990) 42–52.

67. Stan Chu Ilo, "The Second African Synod and the Challenges of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace in Africa's Social Context: A Missional Theological Praxis for Transformation—Part 1," *Missiology* 40.2 (April 2012) 195–204.

theme of Africa. Kenya illustrates an evolved, multifaceted activist version of community-based education for peace, reconciliation, and justice that emphasizes participation.

## Latin America (Brazil as Case Study)

With more than two-fifths of the world's Catholics and a long history of controversial influence in politics, the Church of Latin America is a key locus of CST's ongoing refinement in theory and praxis. Since its second plenary council in Medellín (1968), the Consejo Episcopal Latino-Americano (CELAM) has repeatedly defined the Latin American Church's reception of Vatican II as a response to the continent's "dismal poverty" and "deafening cry" against injustice.<sup>68</sup> Medellín caused a paradigm shift in Latin American theology, making *praxis liberadora* (liberating praxis) its starting point within the lived spirituality of the poor, emphasizing God as savior of the oppressed.<sup>69</sup> After Medellín, faith-inspired social activism became a new priority for the Church across the continent. This was especially apparent in its SCCs, which struck a chord with local culture.<sup>70</sup>

Although it is difficult to generalize for an area as varied politically, socially, and historically as Latin America, religion's influence on protest politics is greater than that of any other social factor.<sup>71</sup> The Catholic Church has a long history of successful participation in workers' movements, land reform, education, the establishment of cooperatives, and advocacy for human rights.

The Marxist wing of liberation theology, with priests like Trappist Ernesto Cardenal Martínez, who advocated the violent struggle that brought the Sandinistas to power in Nicaragua, has been effectively suppressed. In the process, while the Latin American Church continued to verbally affirm its preferential option for the poor, its support for

68. CELAM II, *Medellin Document*, September 6, 1968, "Poverty of the Church" 1, 2, <http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/resources/medpov.htm>. See O. Ernesto Valiente, "The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012) 795–823.

69. For a summary of Latin American liberation theology see Juan Bosch and Juan-José Tamayo-Acosta, eds., *Panorama de la teología latinoamericana: Cuando vida y pensamiento son inseparables . . .*, 2nd ed. (Navarra, España: Verbo Divino, 2002).

70. Brazilian José Oscar Beozzo considers the creation of BECs and social ministries to be the most significant legacy of Vatican II in Latin America. José Oscar Beozzo, "Vatican II Fifty Years Later in Latin America and the Caribbean," *Concilium* 3 (2012) 110–15. Jennifer Hughes shows BECs stem from a deeply religious culture of *lucha* (struggle) that preceded liberation theology and that the two informed each other in the daily life of folk traditions. Jennifer S. Hughes, "The Catholic Church and Social Revolutionaries," in *Religion and Society in Latin America*, ed. Lee M. Penyak and Walter J. Petry (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009) 243–67.

71. Andrew Stein, "Religion, Political Preferences, and Protest Action in Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala," in *The Church at the Grassroots in Latin America: Perspectives on Thirty Years of Activism*, ed. John Burdick and W. E. Hewitt (Westport, CT: Praeger 2000).

social activism suffered.<sup>72</sup> John Paul II's postsynodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*, stresses that "love for the poor must be preferential but not exclusive" (par. 67). The continent's recent history is wrought by conflict between conservatives, who consider social activism a threat to the status quo, and liberationists.<sup>73</sup> John Paul II appointed bishops who often marginalized SCCs, which were viewed as cells of a too-political liberationist theology.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, movements that emphasized spirituality and community with little political activist interests, such as Opus Dei, were promoted and grew.<sup>75</sup>

CELAM's fifth plenary meeting at Aparecida and the election of Pope Francis may be signs of a shift away from the fears that marked an era of Vatican pressure, which rendered CELAM's fourth plenary in Santo Domingo (1992), in the words of one participant, "a conference for bishops instead of a conference of bishops."<sup>76</sup> SCC activism may have faded for a while, but Aparecida revalidated them, as I indicate below. Also, in recent years other EC-based programs and initiatives have surfaced in a more institutional approach to social transformation, which I will explain below. The Church in Latin America's liberative political role is still being defined and remains a vital political force despite its recent setbacks.<sup>77</sup> Grassroots activism with support of church leadership is bearing fruit where political revolutionary movements failed.

72. Robert S. Pelton, CSC, "A Preferential and Evangelizing Option for the Poor," in *Religion and Society in Latin America* 268–87. See also Patricia Musante, "The Progressive Catholic Church and Refashioning of Hegemony in Mexico: An Illustration from Tetelcingo," in *Church at the Grassroots in Latin America* 33–52.

73. Victoria Eulalia Carrasco recounts, for example, Vatican suppression of SCC social activism in Ecuador in 2008. Victoria Eulalia Carrasco, "Sucumbios: A Conciliar Church Assaulted by Christendom," *Concilium* (2011/5) 117–22. The history of internal church conflict over BECs and social problems in Brazil is recounted in Madeleine Adriance, *Promised Land: Base Christian Communities and the Struggle for the Amazon* (New York: SUNY, 1995).

74. The Mexican national meeting of SCCs invited all 110 bishops to attend; only five did: three who were retired and two auxiliaries. See Gerry Proctor, "Challenge of Youth to BECs: Mexico, 2004," in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, ed. Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 28–31.

75. See Edward L. Cleary, "The Catholic Charismatic Renewal: Revitalization Movements and Conversion," in *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America*, ed. Edward L. Cleary and Timothy J. Steigenga (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2008) 153–73.

76. For details, see Alejandro Crosthwaite, OP, "Aparecida: Catholicism in Latin America and the Caribbean at the Crossroads," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 28 (2008) 159–80.

77. Salente Bagolin Bez, "As Comunidades Eclesiais de Base No Novo Milênio," *Monografias—Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná* 173–228, [http://www.utp.br/historia/Tcc/Revista7\\_historia/pdf\\_7/art\\_6.pdf](http://www.utp.br/historia/Tcc/Revista7_historia/pdf_7/art_6.pdf). See too Raymundo Heraldo Maués, "Novas formas de afirmação decidada- nia na Amazônia Oriental Brasileira: Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEBs) camponeses e quilombolas," in *Religión, política, y cultura en América Latina: Nuevas miradas*, ed. Parker G. Christián (Santiago: Universidad de Santiago de Chile, 2012) 225–50.

Today the Continent is at a crossroads between neoliberalism and stridently populist political-economic models that are being played out in its ECs. Social justice continues to be one of the most oft-addressed themes by the Latin American Church. Aided by unprecedented gains in governance and the middle class these last 15 years, the Latin American public no longer believes that the liberationists are Communist revolutionaries.<sup>78</sup> Regional polls consistently show the Catholic Church as ranking highest among institutions in public confidence (more than 60 percent), despite eroding membership.<sup>79</sup> This social status makes the ECs important mediators for peace in many countries experiencing internal crises. The Latin American EC statements show little change in the priority placed on issues of poverty, education, and violence as compared to the century of documents after *Rerum novarum*.

In multiple statements over the last decade, the Church in Latin America, more than on any other continent, has advocated constitutional reforms regarding human rights, equity, and corruption.<sup>80</sup> The Latin American ECs consider those governance reforms an important part of the structural remedy to social injustice (a lesson adopted by the African ECs). In EC statements, one can observe the evolution of a country living through the continent's recent social turmoil. As another example, since 2000 the Bolivian bishops have promulgated three pastoral letters on the environment, three on constitutional reforms, and one on church–state relations. Over the same period the Bolivian bishops authored 15 two- or three-page messages on peace. In the dramatic moments of crisis that the nation has endured during the past 15 years, the Bolivian bishops also released one-page communiqués, calling for calm and dialogue; these communiqués were more than double in number of three-page peace messages issued in that same time period.<sup>81</sup>

Latin American faith-inspired activism includes a significant spiritual concept of community, represented by theologians like Guatemalan Antonio Gonzales. He believes that real justice is not a human work but is God's work when Christians living in community do God's will.<sup>82</sup> Most of the moral theology being done in Latin America

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78. See John Burdick, Phillip Oxhorn, and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds., *Beyond Neoliberalism in Latin America? Societies and Politics at the Crossroads*, a collection of interdisciplinary essays (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). For more on middle-class gains see "The Expanding Middle: Class in Latin America," *Economist* 405.8810 (November 10, 2012) 39–40.

79. This almost doubles the score politicians receive. The nonprofit think tank Latino-barometro's 2010 report is cited in Robert H. Holden and Rina Villars, *Contemporary Latin America: 1970 to the Present* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 31.

80. For an overview of constitutional reforms in Latin America since 1980, see Rodrigo Uprimny, "The Recent Transformation of Constitutional Law in Latin America: Trends and Challenges," *Texas Law Review* 89 (2011) 1587–1609.

81. See <http://www.iglesia.org.bo>.

82. Antonio Gonzalez, *Teología de la praxis evangelica: Ensayo de una teología fundamental* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1999) esp. chaps. 3–6.

today places solidarity at the center, seeking a grassroots economy of solidarity with a democratic market system.<sup>83</sup>

All this helps explain CELAM V's 2007 call to reevangelize the Continent and inspire a spirit of solidarity that must inform any lasting social transformation. Aparecida attempts to harmonize the Church's spiritual mission with its liberative mission by indirectly inspiring and facilitating lay pastoral agents in the public sphere to transform culture. It promotes "an evangelization that places Redemption at the center, that is born out of a crucified love, is capable of purifying the structures of violent society and generating new ones."<sup>84</sup> The bishops stress the importance of SCCs and suggest how to improve them as "a nucleus of the present and future church" (a line omitted by the Vatican editors who gave final approval to the document).<sup>85</sup> Aparecida's final statement also raises the social justice issues of globalization, the role of women in the Church, lay ministry, the diaconate, and practical ways to address its hallmark theme—in the words of Robert Pelton, C.S.C., "a preferential and evangelizing option for the poor."<sup>86</sup> Afterward, Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, S.J. (now Pope Francis), noted that what made all the difference this time was that Aparecida ended with an action plan: its "Continental Mission."<sup>87</sup> It proposed revitalizing SCCs, strengthening community, and witnessing to authentic faith centered in prayer, service, and Eucharist. Since Aparecida, Latin American ECs have written extensive plans of action to implement the Continental Mission. For example, Guatemala's eight-year global plan to implement Aparecida's evangelizing mission specifies practical steps, including objectives, strategies, and courses of action for all 23 of its commissions.<sup>88</sup> I treat Brazil's plan below.

The Church of Chile also exemplifies the global trend I have been describing. Its EC has ten social action offices, including one for migrant workers (est. 2002), a Lenten social justice campaign (est. 2010), and a migration commission that was expanded in 2003 to every diocese. The EC issued four pastoral letters since 2000, including a five-year plan published in 2008 to implement Aparecida. Between 1970

83. Dean Brackley, S.J., and Thomas L. Schubeck, S.J., "Moral Theology in Latin America" *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 123–60.

84. Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document*, June 29, 2007, 543, [http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/english/aparecida\\_ingles.pdf](http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/english/aparecida_ingles.pdf).

85. How the Vatican's editing minimized Aparecida's support of SCCs is recounted in Robert S. Pelton, "A Preferential and Evangelizing Option for the Poor," in *Religion and Society in Latin America* 268–87. See also Pelton, "The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America: A North American Perspective," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 819–27.

86. Pelton, "A Preferential and Evangelizing Option for the Poor" 268.

87. July 11, 2011, interview, <http://www.episcopado.org/portal/component/k2/item>. See too Pope Francis's address to CELAM, July 29, 2013, where he states: "Aparecida did not end with a document; it continues in the Continental Mission," <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-s-address-to-celam>.

88. Bishops Conference of Guatemala, Plan Global 2008–2016, <http://www.iglesiacatolica.org.gt/planglobal.htm>.

and 1990, the Chilean bishops issued 13 pastoral letters on social justice. That number has dropped to five letters between 2000 and today.

In Latin America, church-sponsored social activism has successfully been an agent of modest social transformation, not by revolution or massive capital investment projects, but by building community, legal advocacy for human rights, and numerous grassroots initiatives in the spirit of bearing one another's burdens. The examples of peace-building and constitutional reforms noted above, and Aparecida's return to SCCs as a source for renewal, are all signs arguing for an increase in social activism. Aparecida notes that, despite some progress, there is still much to be done.<sup>89</sup> It remains to be seen whether the Latin American ECs' global plans will succeed. If they are able to capitalize on the regions' unique combination of the world's largest charismatic movement, the popularity of the first Latin American pope, and the best of liberation theology's enduring legacy, skeptics may be surprised in the years to come. I now turn to the case of Brazil.

The Church in Brazil has been called the most progressive in the world for its support of human dignity and human rights.<sup>90</sup> The Brazilian National Bishop's Conference (CNBB) founded by Bishop Dom Hélder Câmara in 1952, the first of its kind in Latin America, has sought to participate in social change, often under harassment from both inside and outside the Church. It has generally sought a reformist *via media* approach between socialism and capitalism.<sup>91</sup> In the decades following World War II, the Church of Brazil, like the Church of many Latin American countries, underwent a paradigmatic shift away from being identified as the church of the establishment, with overtones of the colonial era. In Brazil the catalyst was the assassination of a number of activist priests in the early 1970s during an era of repression by Brazil's military junta. Throughout some 20 years of military dictatorship, the CNBB experienced a cultural conversion. Under political conditions that fostered the SCC movement—because SCC church meetings were one of the few public gatherings allowed by the dictatorship—the CNBB went from proclaiming the gospel as a theoretical discourse to being a “voice for the voiceless” (*voz dos sem voz*). As Gustavo Gutiérrez stressed it must, the Brazilian Church has since progressed from paternalism to empowerment—from *being* a voice to *giving* a voice to the voiceless.<sup>92</sup> This has been both a top-down

89. See CELAM V, *Aparecida Document*, June 29, 2007, chaps. 8 and 9, [http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/english/aparecida\\_Ingles.pdf](http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/english/aparecida_Ingles.pdf).

90. Scott Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916–1985* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1986).

91. For a history of the CNBB, see CNBB, “Brazil:500 Anos Diálogo e Esperança” (2000), Documentos da CNBB 65, [http://www.cnbb.org.br/publicacoes/documentos-para-downloads/doc\\_download/128](http://www.cnbb.org.br/publicacoes/documentos-para-downloads/doc_download/128); and Thomas C. Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil: The Politics of Religion* (Austin: University of Texas, 2012), who argues that the Church's progressive social role is effective despite waning numbers.

92. Gustavo Gutiérrez emphasizes that the preferential option for the poor can really be found only in friendship. The goal is to help the poor find their own voice; for “to be an agent of one's own history is for all people an expression of freedom and dignity, the starting point and a source of authentic development” (*Gustavo Gutiérrez: Spiritual Writings*, ed. Daniel G. Groody [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011] 255).

movement via nationwide pastoral plans, EC commissions, and Lenten brotherhood campaigns, as well as a bottom-up movement via grassroots SCCs, parish campaigns, marches, partnerships, organizations like the Landless Workers Movement (MST), and human rights advocacy.

Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga calls Brazil's vast acres owned by absentee landlords "a social cancer" and land "soaked in blood."<sup>93</sup> The Brazilian EC has been on the forefront of land reform with a very significant and well-organized activism, thanks to its Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) (est. 1975), which was instrumental in creating the Landless Workers Movement (MST) (est. 1984). Since 1964, an annual Lenten Campanha da Fraternidade mobilizes the Brazilian Church, using the media, liturgy, schools, chants, and slogans on themes like work, external debt, agrarian reform, minority rights, and health care. In subsequent years, Catholic Action promoted the annual theme following the see-judge-act methodology. A pastoral plan (*conjunto*) issued every five years attempts to concretize the Church's social action in all 41 archdioceses and 205 dioceses. The CNBB has 17 regional councils of bishops who help implement national policies in dioceses and foster collegiality among the country's more than 300 bishops. In this way, the Church becomes a powerful social force of prophetic resistance, in a country where 68 percent of the population calls itself Catholic. A similar practice is employed with the CNBB's Campanha de Desarmamento and the Campanha de Evangelização. A list of subjects the CNBB addresses in its annual plenary assemblies reveals that the number of statements tackled on intrareligious matters of church life outnumbers questions relating to the social order. On the way to Aparecida, the Brazilian bishops agreed that the challenge for Brazil and the Continent today is to resolve crippling social conflicts through a "new integrating synthesis . . . between proclamation and denunciation . . . between theology and praxis . . . between social liberation and developing the faith," which become properly interconnected when enlightened by Jesus.<sup>94</sup> Surveying its 500-year history, the Brazilian Church declares, "In our eyes the root of evils that afflict our country comes under the name of sin and structures of sin."<sup>95</sup> More than half of that survey details practical measures and social priorities for a better future; they include conversion, responsibility, and the active solidarity of all Brazilians.

The CNBB has one of the most developed social justice missions of any EC in the world. It regularly turns out studies of civil society and social justice. It has 16 commissions with at least six devoted to various aspects of social justice. Since 1967, it has awarded its Silver Daisy Prize for films and their artists that engage Christian values and Brazilian society. It has nationwide ministries: to the homeless, to women in prostitution or at risk of prostitution, to minority communities, and for land reform. It also sponsors a faith-and-politics think tank and has created a CST education center named

93. Pedro Casaldáliga, "Open Letter to the Soul of Brazil," *Concilium* 3 (2002), ed. José Oscar Beozzo and Luiz Carlos Susin (London: SCM, 2002) 123–28.

94. Synthesis of Contributions Received for the Fifth General Conference of Latin American Bishops (2006) N82, <http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/documentosistesisEnglish.pdf>.

95. CNBB, "Brazil: 500 Anos Diálogo e Esperança" no. 34.

after Dom Hélder Câmara. It uses a sophisticated website and social media as a tool to communicate its message and coordinate its sponsored programs.

Predictions that a conservative neo-Romanization had won the day in Brazil when Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns was marginalized and Leonardo Boff silenced (1985) have proved mistaken.<sup>96</sup> Time has shown that the Catholic social movement is too deeply rooted in the Brazilian Church's modern identity to be co-opted. For decades, the bishops have actively played a part in land reform, stepping into bloody controversy numerous times and successfully brokering peaceful outcomes.<sup>97</sup> What happened at Ronda Alta is typical: a group of peasants and an activist priest were given public support by a group of local bishops, and thus violence was averted.<sup>98</sup> On a larger scale, women religious have for decades been founding religious communities in poor urban areas to work with SCCs and priest-less parishes in response to Medellín's call for a preferential option for the poor. With their help Brazil has for decades been at the forefront of the BEC movement.

In 2010, the bishops of Brazil reviewed the contribution of BECs since the 1950s.<sup>99</sup> Their statement reaffirms BECs as a movement of the Holy Spirit and a true sign of the Church's vitality: "Ordinary people in small places doing small things can make extraordinary changes over time."<sup>100</sup> It calls BECs "prayer in action" that promotes solidarity and service. The CNBB credits BECs for fostering a spirituality that considers life and the planet sacred and for promoting small local economies. It praises their solidarity, reverence, tenderness, and respect for human dignity. The CNBB's statement, however, repeats earlier cautions that BECs cannot claim a monopoly on the reign of God and should collaborate with others struggling for the same values. The statement's call for BEC communion with parish and pastor is meant to be a remedy against extremism, which has divided other Latin American Churches, notably Argentina.<sup>101</sup> Yet, despite difficulties, this 50-year assessment concludes that BECs have been, overall, a blessing for the Church of Brazil. As Edward Cleary notes, with the exception of Nicaragua, there is probably no Church in Latin America more partisan than the Church of Brazil, which first saw the charismatic renewal as a threat to

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96. See John Lynch, *New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2012) 259.

97. Tomás Balduino, "The Struggle for a Just Land Policy," in *Brazil: People and Church(es)*, ed. Jose Oscar Beozzo and Luiz Carlos Susin, *Concilium* 3 (2002) 54–60.

98. See Patricia M. Rodriguez, "With or without the People: The Catholic Church and Land-Related Conflicts in Brazil and Chile," in *Religious Pluralism, Democracy, and the Catholic Church in Latin America*, ed. Frances Hagopian (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2009) 185–224.

99. See CNBB, "Mensagem ao Povo de Deus sobre as Comunidades Eclesiais de Base" (2010), Documentos da CNBB no. 92, <http://www.cnbb.org.br/publicacoes/documentos-para-downloads>.

100. *Ibid.* 13.

101. Recounted in *Religious Pluralism, Democracy, and the Catholic Church in Latin America*, ed. Frances Hagopian (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2009) 188–89.



BECs.<sup>102</sup> With more catechists than any other region of the world—1.2 million by 2006, comprised mainly of middle-class members of the Charismatic Renewal Movement—they are a Catholic counter-Pentecostal force in Brazil, yet they are criticized for being less concerned about social issues than with spirituality. Half of Brazil's Catholics identify themselves as charismatic, and the movement has penetrated youth culture, music, the secular media, and every level of the Catholic Church of Brazil.<sup>103</sup> It remains to be seen whether the charismatics will evolve into social activists as Claver predicts for the church of the Philippines, and confirm the 1971 Synod of Bishops' conviction that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world" is essential to preaching the gospel.<sup>104</sup>

In 2005, on the occasion of Brazil's Independence Day and a national corruption scandal threatening the Lula da Silva workers' party-led government, the CNBB addressed a nation fed up with persistent corruption. The bishops demanded democratic institutional reforms, including plebiscites, strengthened institutions, fair elections, and other means to increase political participation and make government more representative.<sup>105</sup> In 2010, the bishops returned to the subject of corruption, blaming the country's inability to cope with the world economic crisis on its failure to implement the structural reforms of its 1988 constitution.<sup>106</sup>

After Aparecida, the CNBB authored a five-year plan, called Guidelines for Evangelizing Action (2011), to implement Aparecida's Continental Mission.<sup>107</sup> Cautious that the Church's mission should not be reduced to a social program, the 103-page statement leaves concrete social justice activism to the judgment of the laity. It stresses the Brazilian Church's spiritual role as being in a permanent state of evangelizing mission, solidarity, faith formation, compassion, and service. It mandates parish structures to set its plan in operation and acknowledges the important role of BECs, but it seems to avoid advocating the direct activism that inspired Brazil's landless workers movement and modern martyrs like Dorothy Stang, S.S.N.D., who was killed in that struggle in 2005.

## Conclusion

Scholars today agree that CST is more than papal teaching. Rather, CST should be understood as a complex living tradition that cannot be understood apart from the communities

102. Edward L. Cleary, *The Rise of Charismatic Catholicism in Latin America* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2011) 117.

103. *Ibid.* chap. 4.

104. Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World* (Vatican City: Vatican, 1971) 6.

105. CNBB, "Pronunciamentos da CNBB 2004–2006" 145–48, Documentos da CNBB no. 83, <http://www.cnbb.org.br/publicacoes/documentos-para-downloads>.

106. CNBB, "Por una Reforma do Estado com Participação Democrática" (2010), [http://www.cnbb.org.br/publicacoes/documentos-para-downloads/doc\\_download/1483-](http://www.cnbb.org.br/publicacoes/documentos-para-downloads/doc_download/1483-).

107. CNBB, "Diretrizes Gerais da Ação Evangelizadora da Igreja no Brasil 2011–2015" (2011), Documentos da CNBB no.94, [http://www.cnbb.org.br/publicacoes/documentos-para-downloads/doc\\_download/1486-](http://www.cnbb.org.br/publicacoes/documentos-para-downloads/doc_download/1486-).

that nurture it and embody its principles—even before it is applied.<sup>108</sup> There are many social movements in the Church that predate *Rerum novarum*.<sup>109</sup> But EC-sponsored activism represents a new widespread version of Catholic social movements. As David Hollenbach observes, theologians of the past century, such as Karl Rahner, James Gustafson, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Edward Schillebeeckx, agree that if the prophetic mission of the Church in today's world is to be effective, it must occur through a corporate creative imagination that arises in the midst of practice.<sup>110</sup> Today, this is what is occurring in the world's ECs. They are not only refining and deepening CST as they apply it to their particular context, but they are also making their social activism more effective with a more multifaceted, participatory, and sophisticated approach to structural change.

The ECs' unique role in society enables the Church to listen and adapt to the people's struggle, and then to define, organize, and improve upon its social mission, while at the same time giving the Church a consistent and prophetic voice in the public square. EC activism for social justice is the synthesis of action from below (dia-praxis) and theory from above (dia-logue) as the people of God share their particular grief and anxieties and work to influence their societies politically, economically, socially, and spiritually. Statements do not stand alone. Emerging from Christian hope and the imperative mission to end the causes of unjust suffering, EC statements express the local churches' painful struggle for a dignified life.

Measuring the effectiveness of increased activism would require a much larger study than this one. Much remains to be done—from seminary education to grassroots organization and diocesan initiatives. To that extent, I must agree with the critics who lament the ineffectiveness of EC statements; however, at the same time, as I have shown here, activism is on the rise across the world. In what follows I will outline several reasons for this increase over the past 15 years.

First, since Soviet Communism has been consigned to the dustbin of history, grand theories of social change have been abandoned for practical development strategies. There are more than two million NGOs today. Practical methods of development are making significant gains in the fight against poverty, and the Church clearly promotes that trend.<sup>111</sup> Any practical gains from activism, even minor ones, are immediately obvious to a community that shares the misery of war, injustice, or poverty.

108. Johan Verstraeten, "Catholic Social Thought and the Movements: Towards Social Discernment and a Transformative Presence in the World," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 10 (2013) 231–39.

109. Michael J. Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740–1890," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M. (Washington: Georgetown University, 2005) 99–124.

110. David Hollenbach, "A Prophetic Church and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination," in *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, ed. John C. Haughey, S.J. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1977) 245–47.

111. Trade, less scarcity due to technologies, and improved governance are the principal causes of these gains, according to the *Economist*, June 1, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21578643-world-has-astonishing-chance-take-billion-people-out-extreme-poverty-2030-not>.

Second, the ECs are relatively new to the Catholic Church; they are still finding their legs. Vatican II made social transformation central to the modern reading of the gospel and the Church's mission. It has taken time for the world Church to realize that mandate and embrace it. Over time, the ECs have grown in their understanding of their role as agent of structural change instead of merely providing relief to suffering. They have also improved their means to share experiences, priorities, and analysis, thanks to international ECs and regular meetings.

Third, there was an uneasy relationship between the Vatican and local ECs during these years, due to fears that the rising influence of local churches would cause division, and that mixing in politics would lead Vatican officials to limit church social involvement as they had done in the past.<sup>112</sup>

Finally, results speak the loudest. Statements have their place and most impact when united with action. It is far easier to envision a better world and draft a critical statement than it is to transform unjust structures. It is far more difficult to realize a good idea, to communicate it to a large population, to set it in operation, and to help people become coresponsible for sustainable social transformation.

The ECs' social justice mission has also put a clearer emphasis on a more spiritual perspective as the ECs try to confront violence and injustice, which they believe begins with the mystery of the human heart, where the Church can have the most impact as "expert in humanity."<sup>113</sup> Solidarity and responsibility continue to be the main axis of the worldwide Church's application of social justice, but it has become a more activist solidarity than it was shown to be in the century of statements analyzed in my earlier study. This solidarity understands participation in human rights movements, weeklong campaigns to raise consciousness, peace-building, BECs, and a host of similar concerted national efforts on many fronts as the best strategy to be leaven in their various communities. Where grassroots activism is combined with the national support that EC statements provide, the Church's impact appears to be greatest. After more than 20 years of advocacy and activism, we can no longer say that CST is our best-kept secret, especially not in the Global South where it is being refined in theory and praxis.<sup>114</sup>

### Author biography

Terence A. McGoldrick received his STD from Fribourg University, Switzerland, and is currently assistant professor of theology at Providence College, RI. Specializing in Catholic social thought, global Catholicism, and Francis de Sales, he has recently published "Everything in

112. Claver, *Making of a Local Church* chaps. 5–6.

113. Paul VI, address to the United Nations, October 4, 1965, [http://unyearbook.un.org/1965YUN/1965\\_P1\\_SEC1\\_CH16.pdf](http://unyearbook.un.org/1965YUN/1965_P1_SEC1_CH16.pdf).

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Marriage Is Holy’: Francis de Sales, a Christian Humanist Theology of Marriage,” *Salesianum* (2013); and “The Spirituality of Human Consciousness: A Catholic Evaluation of Some Current Neuroscientific Interpretations,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* (2012). In progress is an article entitled “The CST Evaluation of Water as a Human Right in Bolivia and Collective Indigenous Property Rights: A Case Study.”