

Medellín Fifty Years Later: From Development to Liberation

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Rafael Luciani 

Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, USA
Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela

Abstract

On August 24, 1968, Paul VI inaugurated the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate. The work sessions were held at the Medellín Seminary between August 26 and September 6. *Medellín* represents the reception of *Gaudium et Spes* within the “People of God” ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* and is considered the only example of a continental reception of Vatican II carried out in a collegial and synodal manner. This article exposes the previous debates, the main topics, and the immediate reception.

Keywords

CELAM, Latin American church, liberation, Medellín, option for the poor, reception, theology of liberation, theory of development, violence

A few days before the Second Vatican Council ended, Pope Paul VI convened the Latin American bishops participating in the council for the sake of celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference (CELAM). In his address to them, the pope encouraged the bishops to draw up a Continental Pastoral Plan.¹ CELAM was created during the First General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, which was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1955. Chapter 11 of the Concluding

1. Cf. Paul VI, *Discorso nel X anniversario del CELAM* (November 23, 1965), https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651123_celam.html.

Corresponding author:

Rafael Luciani, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, 102 College Road, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, 02467, USA.
Email: lucianir@bc.edu

Document of that Rio conference defined CELAM as an “organ of collaboration” between the different bishops’ conferences of Latin America, thus opening the door to the implementation of an ecclesial model based on magisterial synodality.

On January 20, 1968 Pope Paul VI announced the convening of the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, and on August 24, 1968 he inaugurated the event in the cathedral of Bogotá. The working sessions of the conference took place between August 26 and September 6, 1968. The Medellín conference has been considered to be “the only example of a continental reception of Vatican II”² carried out in collegial and synodal form. The most original aspect³ of Medellín was a new collaborative spirit which permeated the event and inaugurated a new way of being church, and which would in turn give birth to a true Latin American ecclesial identity. “No other continent had any event comparable to the conference of Medellín, which was an exemplary case of a collegial, continental reception of Vatican II, carried out faithfully but at the same time selectively and creatively in fidelity to the Council’s principal inspirations.”⁴

Taking as its theme “The Church in the Present Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council,” the conference effected a contextualized reception of Vatican II and thereby gave substance to what had previously been marginal concepts: the church of the poor, and a church committed to the liberation and full flourishing of the needy and the abandoned. This broad horizon, which would become the basis for doing theology and renewing church life, was to become a major contribution of the Latin American church to the universal church. The 16 documents of Medellín reveal a new awareness in the church, namely that “the social situation demands an efficacious presence of the Church that goes beyond the promotion of personal holiness by preaching and the sacraments.”⁵ What is needed is a faithful following of “Jesus Christ who lives in our impoverished brothers and sisters or who dies in them.”⁶

This awareness was evident in the way the documents were presented, which represented an innovation as compared to the council, as Bishop Marcos McGrath recognized: “The division into three areas—human flourishing, evangelization and growth in the faith, and the visible Church and her structures—alters the order more frequently used in the Church both before and after Medellín. Evangelization and growth in the faith come after human flourishing.”⁷

2. Cf. Carlos Schickendantz, “Único ejemplo de una recepción continental del Vaticano II,” *Teología*, 108 (2012): 25–53. The author refers to the origin of this expression in Luis Escalante, *La estructura jurídica y sinodal del Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) y de la Reunión de los Obispos de América* (diss., Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, 2002), 79. Translations of the Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian are my own.
3. Cf. Juan Botero Restrepo, *CELAM. Elementos para su historia* (Bogotá, 1982), 166.
4. José Oscar Beozzo, *A Igreja do Brasil no Concílio Vaticano II: 1959–1965* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 2005), 537.
5. Jorge Mejía, “El pequeño Concilio de Medellín,” *Criterio* 41 (1968): 688.
6. Mejía, “El pequeño Concilio de Medellín,” 689.
7. Marcos McGrath, “Algunas reflexiones sobre el impacto y la influencia permanente de Medellín y Puebla en la Iglesia de América Latina,” in *Medellín* 58–59 (1989): 165–66.

In this article I study the genesis and the implications of this vision. The council had already established that all human activity seeking to improve the living conditions of people “responds to the will of God” (*GS* 34).⁸ My argument is that Medellín went further, prophetically specifying that the will of God is not generic or abstract; rather, there is a need to “be aware that when true development takes place, it is by God’s salvific work, which is the passage, for one and for all, from subhuman living conditions to truly human ones.”⁹ It is a saving passage that moves from a theory of development to a theology of liberation, which supposes not only a mere transformation of society through political and economic elites, but a process of radical change of the system from the base to the elites, considering the poor as subjects and protagonists of their history, not passive recipients of historical forces.

The First Debates about a “Contextualized” Reception of the Council

The decade of the sixties witnessed a growing consciousness of the structural causes of poverty. Both the magisterium and theologians made use of various theories that analyzed the real causes of this drama. The theory of development was used initially to explain Latin America’s dependency on the developed countries. According to this theory, development was synonymous with industrial modernity; it required a set of structural reforms that constituted the state as the principal originator, promoter, and planner; and it made external financing and international trade its two central elements.¹⁰ This way of thinking reached a culminating point in the “Punta del Este Charter,” by which the member countries of the Organization of American States formally established the Alliance for Progress,¹¹ whose main purpose was planning the development of Latin America.¹²

This model of development made economic growth a determining factor of progress; it sought to increase per capita income in underdeveloped nations, following the

8. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World] (December 7, 1965), 34, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (hereafter cited as *GS*).

9. Medellín, *Concluding Document* (Concluding Document), Introducción, 6. For all references regarding the Concluding Document of Medellín, see CELAM. *Las cinco conferencias generales del episcopado latinoamericano. Río de Janeiro, Medellín, Puebla, Santo Domingo, Aparecida*, Ediciones CELAM, Bogotá 2014, http://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf (hereafter cited as “Concluding Document”).

10. Osvaldo Sunkel and Pedro Paz, *El subdesarrollo latinoamericano y la teoría del desarrollo* (Ciudad de México DF: Siglo XXI, 1970), 35.

11. “Carta de Punta del Este,” in *Alianza para el progreso. Documentos básicos*, 14–33, accessed December 25, 2017, <https://otraclasedehistoria.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/documentos-de-alianza-para-el-progreso1.pdf>.

12. Walt Whitman Rostow’s *The Process of Economic Growth* (1962) proposed development theory as the solution to the problems of underdevelopment, through imitation of the industrialization and consumption processes of the developed countries.

pattern and the experience of developed ones. Such a vision disregarded other variables affecting social life, such as political and cultural factors, and it had no problem with the external and internal forms of colonialism which the church's social magisterium had already condemned. According to this model, the agents of change were the international organizations, along with the national governments and the economically powerful groups.

Development or Revolution?

In these years of revolution, it was not long before this theory of development came under fire. The model was criticized as creating dependency on colonial forces external to the countries themselves and as hampering the causes of the popular forces that were struggling for justice. This led to talk in ecclesiastical circles, especially in Europe, of a theology which contemplated revolution as a way of escaping from the existing state of dependency. Belgian theologian Joseph Comblin wrote that "to arrive at a theology of revolution, we need only extend the line already traced by *Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio*, but paying attention now not so much to the concerns of the dominating society as to those of the Christians of the dominated society."¹³ Comblin argued, however, that revolution does not take place just within a particular nation; it also requires a change in global relations.¹⁴

Attempting to adapt this stance to the Latin American context, Brazilian theologian Hugo Assmann lamented that "most countries are being kept undeveloped; they are not in reality 'developing' countries but rather countries that find themselves on a path that is not at all progressive; rather, it is increasingly regressive. We must not let ourselves be deceived by phony progress."¹⁵ According to Assmann, Latin American reality required a liberation process that would lead to radical change in the system's orientation: "By the term 'liberation process' I mean the new revolutionary path that Latin American countries have to follow if they really want to escape from their situation of dependency."¹⁶ He warned, however, that "it would be an error to require the official Church to espouse the revolutionary process publicly. The temptation to form a left-wing Catholicism must be avoided at all costs."¹⁷ His main goal was to show that the prevailing development theories were based on models borrowed from the

13. Joseph Comblin, *Théologie de la Révolution: Théorie* (Paris: PUF, 1970), 15. For the Spanish version of the encyclical consulted here, see Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, March 25, 1967, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html (hereafter cited as *PP*).

14. Joseph Comblin, *Teología de la práctica de la revolución*, trans. Marta García (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 1979), 14–15.

15. Hugo Assmann, "Die Situation der unterentwickelt gehaltenen Länder als Ort einer Theologie der Revolution," in *Diskussion zur "Theologie der Revolution"*, ed. Ernst Feil and Rudolf Weth (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1969), 225.

16. Hugo Assmann, *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1973), 123.

17. Cf. Hugo Assmann, "Die Situation der unterentwickelt gehaltenen Länder als Ort einer Theologie der Revolution," 231.

so-called first world, that they were being imposed unilaterally from outside, and that they were keeping the poor countries perpetually dependent on the wealthy ones. For such theories, concepts like freedom and national sovereignty were utopian.

Overcoming “Installed Violence”

In the search for viable responses to the Latin American situation, a valuable contribution was made by Dom Hélder Câmara during the Tenth Conference of CELAM, held in Mar de Plata in 1966. He began his exposition by alluding to the First Conference of Latin American Bishops, in 1955, which had identified the lack of priestly vocations as the church’s major problem on the continent. Câmara urged the bishops of CELAM to “revise their thinking about the so-called ‘number one problem’ of Latin America: contrary to what we have thought and stated, it is not the problem of priestly vocations but the problem of underdevelopment.”¹⁸ Facing *this* problem required the church to find new ways of relating to reality since its identity and mission were intimately interwoven with all aspects of the continent’s sociocultural, economic, and political transformation.

In a conference he gave in Paris on April 25, 1968, Câmara warned of the need for change and not simply revision or reform. Real change, such as that proposed by McGrath at Medellín, would be the first sign of the times that a new epoch was dawning in Latin America. Câmara insisted, “If we view the underdeveloped world from any angle—economic, scientific, political, social, religious—we come to understand that a superficial, perfunctory reform will simply not be sufficient. . . . What is needed is a structural revolution.”¹⁹ He believed that this revolution demanded the commitment of all to the integral development and full flourishing of every human being. Distancing himself from the theory of dependence, Câmara criticized not only the external factors creating and sustaining underdevelopment, but the internal ones as well:

Who is not aware that there is internal colonialism in the underdeveloped countries? Who does not know that there exists in each country a small privileged elite, whose wealth is maintained at the expense of the misery of millions of their fellow citizens? Semi-feudal, seemingly patriarchal regimes still exist, but in reality people have no rights, and they are living in a state of truly subhuman slavery.²⁰

While acknowledging that underdevelopment was the direct result of “systematic violence,”²¹ Dom Câmara always insisted that the response to such violence could never be ruthless or cruel. At the Sixth World Congress of the International Secretariat of Pax Romana Jurists, held in Dakar, Senegal, December 5–10, 1968, he stated clearly that the path of nonviolence required people to exercise “a liberating moral pressure”

18. Dom Hélder Câmara, “La Iglesia ante el mundo moderno in América Latina,” in *Signos de renovación. Recopilación de documentos post-conciliares de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Lima: Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social, 1969), 60.

19. Dom Hélder Câmara, “La violencia, ¿opción única?” *Revista SIC*, no. 307 (1968): 304.

20. Hélder Câmara, “La violencia, ¿opción única?” 305.

21. Hélder Câmara, “La violencia, ¿opción única?” 306.

which would bring about a change of mental structures: “This is the conversion of which the Gospel speaks.”²² Like Paul VI, he believed that “peace without economic and social development is only a truce; it can easily be undone, either by a just rebellion of the starving masses or by the infiltration of negative, alienating ideologies.”²³

Paul VI himself, in denouncing the situation of dependency in which most of humankind was living (*PP* 30), referred to the possible use of violence, seeming to justify the path of “just insurrection” and revolution in certain cases (*PP* 31). This text gave rise to much discussion prior to Medellín. In the next paragraph of the encyclical, however, he affirmed that the primary way to achieve the changes required should be reforms, which should be undertaken with urgency (*PP* 32).

The pulse of that epoch can be appreciated in words written by Father Arnaldo Spadaccino in 1967, a year before the meeting of Medellín. He wrote of the growing awareness of the need for “the full development of human beings in all aspects of their lives and with help from all the earth’s riches.”²⁴ Envisioning a type of development committed to the flourishing of human beings in all their spiritual and material dimensions, he moved far beyond the prevailing reductionist, economic ideology of human development.

The Scandal of Underdevelopment

Another important source for understanding this epoch is the Pastoral Letter of Chilean Bishop Manuel Larraín Errázuriz, “Development: Success or Failure in Latin America.” It was published on June 24, 1965, a few months after the end of the council. In 1963 Larraín was named president of CELAM, but prior to that, in 1960, during the Fifth Ordinary Meeting of Bishops in Buenos Aires, he had stressed the vital connection between pastoral ministry and religious sociology, hoping to give a new orientation to the church’s action in the world. His vision paved the way for the creation of the Latin American Pastoral Institute and the Latin American Catechetical Institute.

In his pastoral letter Larraín wrote that “underdevelopment kills millions of human beings every year.”²⁵ In an interview given to *Informations Catholiques Internationales* in 1965, he explained that “hunger and sickness are the immediately observable manifestations, but we must also realize that material privation is not the only evil produced by underdevelopment. Even when the situation in this respect is very different from one region to another, there can always be said to exist an intellectual and cultural hunger.”²⁶ From this he concluded that “development is a form of humanism. It should

22. See the complete discourse in Dom Hélder Câmara, “Un programa de acción para el subdesarrollo,” *Selecciones de Teología*, no. 31 (1969): 249–52.

23. Hélder Câmara, “La Iglesia ante el mundo moderno en América Latina,” 66.

24. Arnaldo Spadaccino, “De la *Mater et Magistra* a la *Populorum Progressio*,” *Cristianismo y Revolución*, no. 5 (1967): 12.

25. Manuel Larraín Errázuriz, “Carta Pastoral. Desarrollo: éxito o fracaso en América Latina. Llamado de un obispo a los cristianos,” *Veritas*, no. 37 (August 2017): 206.

26. Larraín Errázuriz, “El subdesarrollo: las tres hambres,” in *Monseñor Manuel Larraín E., Escritos completos*, ed. Pedro de la Noi (Santiago de Chile: Editorial San José, 1988), 158.

respond to the threefold hunger—physical, cultural, and spiritual—that torments both individual persons and modern society. It is a question not only of having more but of being more. . . . The flourishing of each and every individual is what gives development its true purpose and meaning.”²⁷

Larraín helped to lay the foundation for the notion of structural sin in his references to models which impede the full development of the human subject. He criticized what he called the “‘vicious circles’ of misery (which) clearly demonstrate the structural defects from which our continent suffers.”²⁸ He concluded that there was an urgent and overriding need to humanize the structures themselves so that the values of God’s Kingdom might flourish.

True Development

Later, these ideas inspired Paul VI to reaffirm the need for true development so that people could “be more” (*PP* 6). *Populorum Progressio* addressed the relationship between integral human development and the need to change social structures and living conditions. The pope was not interested in a progress external to the person, such as technological development; he understood it rather as the true fulfillment of the human vocation, which finds its deepest desires realized in God: “By the design of God, every person is called to develop toward self-fulfillment, for every human life is a vocation” (*PP* 15). What we need is true “development, which helps each and every person move from less human conditions to those that are more human” (*PP* 20). Thus, for Paul VI development clearly meant concrete action to promote human welfare and flourishing.

The pope went a step further, emphasizing that development should be integral and inclusive since “it has to promote the good of every person and the good of the whole person” (*PP* 14). Perhaps his most novel contribution was his wide-ranging understanding of the various aspects that make up the lives of individuals (*PP* 13); such a vision required putting emphasis on the development of peoples and their cultures. It is impossible to think about individuals without considering the wider ambience in which they live, and that is why Pope Paul called the church to accompany

the development of peoples, . . . particularly the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases, and ignorance; of those who are seeking a wider share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are aiming purposefully at their complete fulfillment. (*PP* 1)

The principle that inspired this discernment was that of social justice: the greater the practice of justice, the greater will be the possibilities that open up for every person and every people to participation in the structures and relationships of collaboration, productivity, growth, and flourishing. It is in this context that we should understand

27. Larraín Errázuriz, “El subdesarrollo: las tres hambres,” 158–59.

28. Larraín Errázuriz, “Carta Pastoral,” 213.

the pope's statement that "development is the new name of Peace" (PP 87), an expression he borrowed from Cardinal Feltin, archbishop of Paris, in fidelity to the call of John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* (1963). But Paul VI gave an even deeper meaning to the concept of peace:

To wage war on misery and to struggle against injustice is to promote, along with improved conditions, the human and spiritual progress of all men and women, and therefore the common good of humanity. Peace cannot be limited to a mere absence of war, the result of an ever-precarious balance of forces. No, peace is something that is built up day after day, in the pursuit of an order intended by God, which implies a more perfect form of justice among men. (PP 76)

Therefore peace, as the new name for development, involves practicing justice and creating a more humane social order. In this regard the encyclical is quite concrete, pointing out that "development which is good and genuine does not consist in wealth that is self-centered and sought for its own sake, but rather in an economy which is put at the service of humankind, *the daily bread which is distributed to all, as a source of brotherhood and a sign of Providence*" (PP 86, emphasis mine). That is why the church must contribute to helping "every nation produce more and better-quality goods so that all its inhabitants can have *a truly human standard of living*" (PP 48; emphasis mine).

The Path of Integral Liberation

Before long there arose a debate about liberation²⁹ as an alternative model for interpreting reality. The argument was first put forward in 1964 at a meeting of theologians at the Franciscan faculty of Petropolis, Brazil. Attending the meeting were Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, and Lucio Gera, who spoke about the function of theology and the role of the theologian in the church and in society. This meeting was followed by a conference given by Gutiérrez, whose title, "Toward a Theology of Liberation," gave a proper name to the theology that was emerging in the region. Arguing for a shift from development theory to liberation theology, Gutiérrez explained his proposal as follows:

The poor countries are becoming ever more aware that their underdevelopment is simply the byproduct of the development of other countries and that their own development will therefore come about only by freeing themselves from the domination that the rich countries exercise over them. Such thinking leads to a vision of development that is more conflictual. The causes of underdevelopment must be attacked, and the deepest cause is the economic, social, political, and cultural dependence of some peoples on others. Given this perspective, it would appear more adequate and richer in content to speak of a process of liberation³⁰ [because] the liberation of human beings in the course of history does not mean only better

29. Cf. Rafael Luciani, *El Papa Francisco y la teología del pueblo* (Madrid: PPC, 2016), 89–132.

30. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Hacia una teología de la liberación* (Bogotá: Indo-American Press Service 1971), 23. The original version was published by the Servicio de Documentación, JECI, in Montevideo in 1969.

living conditions, radical change of structures, or social revolution. It means much more: the continual creation of a new way of being human, a permanent cultural revolution.³¹

This vision was progressively deepened in conferences in Santiago de Chile (1966) and Montevideo (1967), after which the Latin American Pastoral Institute organized further encounters in Bogotá, Havana, and Cuernavaca during the early 1970s. The ultimate source of meaning for any process of liberation was considered to be theological, not sociological, and this thesis was enunciated well in the *Manifesto of Third-World Bishops* (1967), a document in which 18 bishops united their voices in prophetic denunciation:

God does not want there to be rich people who enjoy the goods of this world at the expense of the poor. No, God does not want there to be poor people living forever in misery. Religion is not the opium of the people. Religious is a force that lifts up the poor and brings down the proud, that gives bread to the hungry and leaves hungry those who are sated. . . . Jesus teaches us that the second commandment is the same as the first since we cannot love God without loving our brothers and sisters. Jesus warns us that we will all be judged by a single criterion: "I was hungry, and you gave me to eat. . . . It was I who was hungry" (Matt 25, 31–46).³²

Given this reality, the church is confronted with the will of God, who wants all his sons and daughter to flourish on this earth and "to have the possibility of having possibilities."³³ The bishops therefore declared that "once a system ceases to safeguard the common good in order to serve the interests of a select few, the Church must not only denounce the injustice but also withdraw from the iniquitous system,"³⁴ because that is what Jesus did. In this same spirit the members of the priests' movement on May 1, 1968 sent a letter to the bishops of Medellín, in which they asked that a distinction be made between the repressive structural violence of the region and the justified violence of the oppressed, who were fighting to be liberated from an unjust system.

Toward a New Ecclesial Consciousness

It was in this vibrant context of ecclesial debates and social conflicts that the Medellín conference was held. This was one of those events that divide history into a before and an after, for it defined a new ecclesial identity on the basis of theological options and pastoral lines which are still in force fifty years later.

It was at Medellín that Latin American theology not only raised the questions, "Where is God present today?" and "Who are the ones that God favors?" It also made

31. Gutiérrez, *Hacia una teología de la liberación*, 25.

32. *Manifiesto de Obispos del Tercer Mundo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Búsqueda, 1968), 19. The manuscript was made public on August 15, 1967.

33. Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), xvii and 15.

34. *Manifiesto de Obispos del Tercer Mundo*, 19.

them key questions for Christian discernment on the continent. The criterion for responding to these questions is to be found in the principle of preferentiality, which focuses especially on Christ's relations with the poor and his views on poverty.³⁵ The bishops at Medellín, in embracing *Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio*, therefore made an option for the poor, who are the majority of humanity, and they asked how the church in Latin America could contribute to that "transition from less human conditions to those which are more human,"³⁶ in fidelity to the call of Paul VI (*PP* 20).

Medellín played a decisive role in the development of a prophetic consciousness and a sociocultural identity in the Latin American church. The bishops' discussions at Medellín sought to move the church toward being less European and toward developing its own character by "drawing on and serving its people and its cultures."³⁷ They wanted a church that understood active evangelization as proper to its mission and its identity, and they stressed the communitarian dimensions of faith, thus resisting the temptation of privatized religion and marginal devotions.³⁸

Two prior meetings were held to prepare the content and organize the sessions of the Medellín conference. The first meeting, held in Capilla, Colombia in May 1967, produced the "general theme—*The Latin American Church Responding to the Second Vatican Council*—which was to be developed in three successive moments: analysis of the socio-religious reality of the continent, theological reflection on that reality in the light of the main teachings of the Council, and proposals for applying these teachings to the Latin American reality."³⁹ The second meeting, held in Lima in November 1967, adopted the method of "see–judge–act," and it defined the general theme of the conference more precisely as *The Church's Role in the Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*.

Also worthy of mention are three very important texts from other meetings, which developed the key themes further and improved their formulation. The first document was "The Active Presence of the Church in the Development and Integration of Latin America," fruit of the *Tenth Ordinary Assembly of CELAM*, held in Mar del Plata in October 1966. The second text emerged from the *First Seminar of Priests*, an event sponsored by the Social Department of CELAM in Santiago de Chile in October/November 1967. The title of the document was "Communiqué of 38 Priests of Latin America on the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*." The third document, "The Social Action and Social Ministry of the Church in Latin America," was produced at the May 1968 meeting of the presidents of the Bishops' Social Action Commission, which took place in Itapoã, Salvador de Bahía, Brazil.

35. Medellín: *Pobreza de la Iglesia*, 7.

36. Medellín: *Introducción a las conclusiones*, 6.

37. See Clodovis Boff, "La originalidad histórica de Medellín," *Revista electrónica Latinoamericana de teología*, no. 203p, <http://servicioskoinonia.org/relat/203p.htm>.

38. "Catechesis, therefore, should not limit itself to the individual dimensions of life. The Christian base communities, open to the world and inserted in the world, must be the fruit of evangelization." Medellín, *Concluding Document*, 10.

39. Silvia Scatena, *In populo pauperum. La Chiesa latinoamericana dal Concilio a Medellín (1962–1968)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), 295.

The Mar del Plata text took the initial steps toward validating human promotion as an activity proper to the church; the document gave a new accent to Latin American pastoral theology by linking it with the development processes of the continent. This document assimilated the theology of historical salvation inspired by the council, as well as the “Christian humanism” proposed by Paul VI. Its intention was to banish any possible dualism between faith and life, between relationship with God and the flourishing of human beings in the here and now.⁴⁰ This perspective yielded three elements that eventually became integral parts of the church’s method of discernment and its work in the contemporary world: (a) “true interest in and thorough knowledge of the circumstances in which Christians work and live”;⁴¹ (b) “solid theological reflection on the best ways to live out the fullness of the Christian vocation in the modern world”;⁴² and (c) a new social focus in pastoral ministry. “Since ‘pastoral ministry for the community should also include an earnest effort to carry out specific social action’ (Paul VI, 1965), it would be desirable that the Bishops’ Conferences involve CARITAS in their pastoral ministry in order to promote development.”⁴³ Thus Mar del Plata laid the foundations for a theology of the secular sphere that could be united with a historical, contextual soteriology and an integral Christian anthropology.

The second text was published one year later, in 1967, during the First Seminar of Priests, a meeting promoted by CELAM. The priests attending this meeting acknowledged “the declarations of some bishops in poor countries who are committing the whole Church to the task of promoting human development and the liberation of all men and women.”⁴⁴ The priests proposed various ideas for future church renewal that merit reflection: the theme of the poor as subjects of their own history,⁴⁵ and the situation of dependence that impedes just development, and the existence of structural evil.⁴⁶ Their document stated,

We feel bound to denounce this situation as the product of a society that is built on the concept of “profit as the vital motor” of the economy (Paul VI). It is a society that has

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40. “Believers understand history—where the earthly vocations of persons and communities are realized—as the unfolding of God’s salvific plan for all humankind (cf. Dogmatic Constitution ‘*Dei Verbum*’ 2–6).” CELAM, *Presencia activa de la Iglesia en el desarrollo e integración de América Latina. Conclusiones de la Asamblea Extraordinaria del CELAM realizada en Mar del Plata* (Bogotá: Documentos CELAM, 1966), 14 (hereafter cited as *Mar del Plata*).
41. *Mar del Plata*, 15.
42. *Mar del Plata*, 16.
43. *Mar del Plata*, 33.
44. CELAM, “Comunicado de 38 sacerdotes de América Latina sobre la Encíclica *Populorum Progressio*,” in *Signos de renovación. Recopilación de documentos post-conciliares de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Lima: Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social, 1969), 92 (hereafter cited as “Comunicado de 38 sacerdotes”).
45. “The new slavery which oppresses the masses of the Latin American continent often affects the deepest recesses of individuals. It prevents them not only from sharing in the goods to which they have a right but often also from becoming protagonists of their own destiny.” “Comunicado de 38 sacerdotes,” 91.
46. “Comunicado de 38 sacerdotes,” 91.

subordinated basic rights and human dignity to minority-controlled economic forces that “have produced the international imperialism of money” (Pius XI) and a “disastrous economic system.” (Paul VI).⁴⁷

The third text, also very important, emerged from the meeting at Itapoã in 1968. It delved deeply into the historical soteriology proposed by *Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio* and made it a key element for defining the identity and the mission of Latin American ecclesiology. Salvation does not happen outside of history, nor is it unrelated to the full panoply of concrete conditions in which human beings live and labor. Salvation is always a process of humanization, personalization, and insertion into the fullness of a life that begins here and now. Consequently, “the structures of society exist to serve the human person, promoting the development of all human beings in all their dimensions.”⁴⁸ The true challenge for Latin American development is to overcome the unequal relations between the rich, industrialized countries and the poor, underdeveloped countries of the periphery, which have depended mainly on the export of their raw materials. The document concludes that the church can make a crucial contribution in this regard because

it is the Church’s specific mission to communicate to secular society the light and the energy flowing from the global vision of humanity expressed in the Gospel. In this way the Church contributes to development in all its aspects: demographic, economic, social, civil, and cultural. Adopting a purely apolitical attitude would mean the Church was failing in its essential mission. However, its intervention should not follow political criteria but should be in accord with the light of the Gospel.⁴⁹

Formalizing the Reception of the Council

This path of collegial and continental reflection led to what is considered the first formal preparatory meeting for Medellín, which took place in Bogota on January 19, 1968. Those attending this meeting discussed three papers prepared by *periti*: “Human Promotion” (Renato Poblete), “The Life of the Church as an Institution in Latin America” (Raimundo Caramurú de Barros), and “The Church’s Evangelizing Work in Latin America” (Gustavo Gutiérrez). Commissions were formed, one for each of the themes treated. Bishop Antonio Quarracino and the *periti* Edgar Beltrán and Jorge Mejía, among others, worked on the draft of the Documento Básico Preliminar (Basic Preliminary Document [BPD]),⁵⁰ which had three parts: the reality of Latin America, theological reflection, and pastoral guidelines.

47. “Comunicado de 38 sacerdotes,” 92.

48. CELAM, *América Latina: Ação e Pastoral Sociais. Conclusões de Itapoã* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1968), 24 (hereafter cited as *Ação e Pastoral Sociais*).

49. *Ação e Pastoral Sociais*, 26.

50. CELAM, “Documento Básico Preliminar para la II Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano,” *Revista Medellín* (Separata especial), no. 76 (1993): 1–52 (hereafter cited as “Basic Preliminary Document”).

The DPB began by recalling the message Paul VI sent to CELAM on September 29, 1966, in which the pope spoke of continuing the conversation he had had with the Latin American bishops in Rome on November 23, 1965. At the 1996 meeting, the pope remarked, the bishops would again “take up the same theme, situating it within the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, applying it to the specific sphere of development, and decisively affirming the need for profound structural reforms and major changes in society.”⁵¹ At this point Paul VI cited the call of *Gaudium et Spes* to undertake structural changes (GS 63; 26).

The DBP argued that serious commitment to changing structures was the only thing that could avoid the path of violence. The church should follow the path of human promotion because “social development means, on the one hand, improved living standards, elimination of extreme poverty, and provision of adequate social services; on the other hand, it means making social structures less rigid and providing more avenues of social mobility.”⁵² This process of promoting change and social mobility is founded on the integral, historical soteriology that characterized the council; it is “the salvation that Jesus Christ brings to this world,”⁵³ even though that salvation will not be “totally and definitively accomplished until the end of history and our entrance into the fullness of God’s Kingdom. . . . Even so, this same Kingdom is already present among us, shaping the march of history.”⁵⁴ The Basic Preliminary Document insisted that salvation means fully developing and personalizing every dimension of human reality. With this document, two basic principles were established: (a) close correlation between the council and Medellín,⁵⁵ and (b) a united collegial reception of the council, and acceptance of the challenge of analyzing the church’s new reality on the Latin American continent in the light of the signs of the times.⁵⁶ The next development, in June 1968, was the *Documento de Trabajo* (Working Document [WD]) which would serve as a guiding instrument during the Medellín conference.⁵⁷

51. Pablo VI, “Messaggio di Paolo VI ai partecipanti alla X riunione del CELAM. 29 settembre 1966,” https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches/1966/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19660929_riuinione-celam.html.

52. “Basic Preliminary Document,” 5–6.

53. “Basic Preliminary Document,” 20.

54. “Basic Preliminary Document,” 18.

55. “All the Council’s pronouncements about this world that is undergoing rapid, extensive, and profound changes can be strongly reaffirmed for our Latin American world. These changes are effecting such a great transformation in our attitudes and ways of life that we have to speak about a brand new period in Latin American history.” “Basic Preliminary Document,” 2.

56. “Just as the Church, in the Council, valiantly faced the new world of these times, so must the Church in Latin America face the new Latin American world.” “Basic Preliminary Document,” 3.

57. CELAM, *II Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano: Documento de Trabajo* (Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, August 26–September 7, 1968), 24 (hereafter cited as “Working Document”).

The Working Document captured well the church's great concern for human development and flourishing:

Given the present situation of underdevelopment, the Church must commit itself to the integral promotion of the Latin American peoples. With authentic Christian love, the Church acts in special solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. This commitment requires the Church to defend justice by denouncing the many injustices, by pointing out the need for structural reforms, and by offering its cooperation in bringing about the urgently needed changes. The Church must, in particular, courageously defend the dignity of human persons and their right to freedom as an indispensable element of their full realization. By fighting for these values, the Church will be making an effective contribution to peace on our continent.⁵⁸

Recognizing that they would be engaging in an unprecedented process of Christian discernment, the bishops with great honesty affirmed “the grave responsibility that believers have in this task of integral development of the whole person and of all persons” (WD 20). This responsibility needed to be translated into a Christian response to the sad reality of Latin America: “the misery and ignorance experienced by the disinherited, the inertia and resistance to change on the part of the privileged, the scant participation of the great majority of people in decisions about the common good, and the violence of those who despair of finding a peaceful solution and a real change of norms and values” (WD 18). The bishops also recognized the crisis confronting traditional Christianity as it committed itself to “the struggle to overcome the conditions of underdevelopment and the social inequalities, the efforts to free people from all depersonalizing forces, including sin, and the need to find paths toward a more personal, authentic faith” (WD 18).

The soteriology of the Working Document called for overcoming the dualism between the human and the Christian, thus making clear the reciprocal relationship that exists between the Christian way of life and the development of peoples, since everything that promotes the processes of personalization and the integral improvement of living conditions finds its place in God's plan of salvation. In this respect, the document states,

Christians who neglect their temporal obligations are failing not only in their responsibilities toward their neighbors but especially in their obligations toward God, and they are putting their eternal salvation in danger (*GS* 43). Human beings are not saved by acts disconnected from the particulars of their existence and their vocation in the People of God. They are saved by acts—often humble and hidden ones—which constitute a generous response and commitment to building a new world which they offer to God. Only in this way will they be able to overcome one of the worst errors of our time, the divorce between faith and life that was deplored by the Council.⁵⁹

Salvation as Liberation and Human Promotion

During the conference several papers were presented that adumbrated the ideas of the Working Document and also brought together the conclusions of earlier meetings. The

58. “Working Document,” 24–25.

59. “Working Document,” 20.

most important ideas found in the various presentations given at the conference were those spelling out the church's commitment to integral development and human promotion. Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas, México, speaking on "Evangelization in Latin America," clearly expressed what was at stake in this reception of the council: "We need to change our attitudes and our conception of a Church that remains outside the world and opposed to it. The Church is the People of God engaged in history: the Church is in the world."⁶⁰

The correlation established with the Incarnation has opened the way to understanding the church in terms of its insertion into the social, economic, political, and religious reality of its time, just as Jesus did during his earthly life in order to offer salvation through his words and deeds. The importance of the church's salvific mission was stressed in the introduction to the published papers, written by Bishop Brandão Vilela, president of CELAM, and Bishop Eduardo F. Pironio, secretary of CELAM:

The idea of integral salvation encompasses the whole of humanity (soul and body, individual and society, time and eternity) and the whole of the world. This salvation—offered by the Church as sign and instrument—requires that human beings be totally liberated from the slavery of sin and its consequences (ignorance, oppression, poverty, hunger, and death) and incorporated into a new life by means of grace, the principle and kernel of eternity. The Kingdom of God is already present among us, and it is moving forward, intimately entwined with human progress, toward the consummate eschatological fullness.⁶¹

It was in this same spirit that Cardinal Juan Landázuri Ricketts opened the conference. His words, echoing the discourse with which John XXIII opened the council, stressed the centrality of the Kingdom of God: "We must be thoroughly permeated with the message of Christ in order to understand that the Kingdom of God cannot reach full maturity as long as there is no integral development. In our pastoral service, therefore, we will seek how best to make the Lord's love incarnate in the Church today."⁶²

The organic horizon that characterized Medellín described in great depth and with new language "the relation between the theology of creation and the theology of development, and the relation of both to the theology of redemption."⁶³ In his presentation, "The Signs of the Times in Latin America Today," McGrath stated that change was the principal sign of the times of the Latin American epoch. It was therefore

60. Samuel Ruiz García, "La evangelización en América Latina," in *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio: Ponencias*, ed. CELAM (Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1968), 167.

61. Dom Avelar Brandão Vilela and Eduardo F. Pironio, "Palabras de presentación," in *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio: Ponencias*, ed. CELAM (Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1968), 10–11.

62. Juan Landázuri Ricketts, "Discurso inaugural," in *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio: Ponencias*, ed. CELAM (Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1968), 19.

63. Marcos McGrath, "Los signos de los tiempos en América Latina hoy," in *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio: Ponencias*, ed. CELAM (Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1968), 90.

necessary, in line with *Gaudium et Spes*, to channel the disillusion that resulted from the manifest failure of modernity to bring about “well-being, freedom, justice, integral development, and inner and outer peace for all human beings (*GS 4*).”⁶⁴ Consequently, all change that is the fruit of a true process of integral liberation should follow the path of human promotion:

In Latin America these attitudes are defined principally in terms of the social problem, which may be understood as “human promotion,” “development,” “revolution,” etc. We are clearly confronted with the extremely critical task of changing unjust structures, a task urged upon us by Council documents, encyclicals, and many pastoral letters. This will be seen concretely in these days, when we deal with the topic of human promotion.⁶⁵

Pironio, speaking on “Christian Interpretation of the Signs of the Times Today in Latin America,” supported this new perspective, arguing that salvation is the full development of people’s values, which requires “complete liberation, elimination of all destitution, redemption from sin and its consequences (hunger, poverty, sickness, ignorance, etc.).”⁶⁶ Citing Paul VI, Pironio recalled that

human beings are called to be their full selves, to “seek to do more, know more, and have more in order to be more” (*PP 6*). Creators of their own destiny, they have a particular mission in time, in response to a divine call. “In the design of God, all human beings are called upon to develop and fulfill themselves, for every life is a vocation.” (*PP 15*).⁶⁷

Pironio recognized, however, that human flourishing is difficult to attain when “anti-human” conditions exist. When people lack access to culture, work, and basic necessities, there can be no hope for integral development. He stressed that the church should be a sign of the “Kingdom of Justice” and not of itself. The church is the “Servant of Yahweh,” with the mission of denouncing unjust inequality and working for the world’s salvation.⁶⁸

Human development thus becomes integrated directly into ecclesiology, not only into pastoral ministry; it becomes an essential part of the church’s identity and mission, not just an accidental aspect of the church’s situation in the world. It is the way in which the church is faithful to Christ, its only Lord.

This initial presentation offered a theological foundation for the subsequent intervention of Bishop Eugênio de Araujo Sales, who spoke on “The Church in Latin America and Human Promotion.” He explained that “development is our natural

64. McGrath, “Los signos de los tiempos en América Latina hoy,” 81.

65. McGrath, “Los signos de los tiempos en América Latina hoy,” 82.

66. Eduardo F. Pironio, “Interpretación cristiana de los signos de los tiempos hoy en América Latina,” in *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio: Ponencias*, ed. CELAM (Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1968), 115.

67. Pironio, “Interpretación cristiana de los signos de los tiempos hoy en América Latina,” 110.

68. Pironio, “Interpretación cristiana de los signos de los tiempos hoy en América Latina,” 112–13.

vocation. Basic anthropology tells us that the social dimension is an exigency inherent to our nature. A human community in which all do not contribute to the harmonious growth of all is cruelly unjust.”⁶⁹ It is therefore not simply a problem of situating persons and structures in a particular social location, but of understanding that justice is born of this relational character of the human being as a social being. Touching directly on the identity and the mission of the parishes, the bishop recommended that “parishes should promote authentic formation of humanly Christian communities, and should do this not only by administering the sacraments and teaching the truths of the Gospel . . . but also centers for the integral formation of the people.”⁷⁰ This perspective helps us understand the importance of the ecclesiological inversion which Medellín accomplished by embracing the model of the church as People of God, where small basic communities of Christian living give life to the parish as a whole and make it a community of communities.

The various presentations reinforced the thesis of Samuel Ruiz in his speech on “Evangelization in Latin America” regarding the specific mission of the church in its work of human promotion: “As Christians we should feel committed to insuring not only that development brings about material well-being and culture but that it humanizes, liberates, and dignifies. When this happens, there will be a better understanding of the Gospel, which is essentially humanizing and liberating.”⁷¹

The Identity and Mission of the Church in the World

Medellín incorporated human promotion into the very mission of the church in the world so that the whole evangelizing process might respond to the message of integral salvation which the church must announce to all peoples.⁷² Medellín understood salvation in terms of three dimensions of ecclesial action: “*liberation* from all servitude, personal *maturation*, and collective *integration*” (Concluding Document [CD], *Introducción* 4, emphases original). These are the ways in which the church should contribute to the creation of a new society. By uniting human promotion, evangelization, and liberation,

69. Eugênio de Araujo Sales, “La Iglesia en América Latina y la promoción humana,” in *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio: Ponencias*, ed. CELAM (Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1968), 130.

70. Araujo Sales, “La Iglesia en América Latina y la promoción humana,” 135.

71. Ruiz, “La evangelización en América Latina,” 156.

72. The section on human promotion in the *Concluding Document* is composed of five documents: *Justice, Peace, Family, Education, and Youth*. These texts represent Medellín’s reception of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio* on the basis of a People of God ecclesiology, following Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church in the Modern World) (November 21, 1964), 19, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. They shift the understanding of evangelization from paternalist indoctrination to human promotion and social development as desired by God. This means the conversion of structures to values of justice and solidarity, which will lead to a reform of ecclesial structures and mentality so that the church can be a genuine sign of liberation in the new age.

Medellín was able to avoid not only “the dualism which separates temporal tasks from sanctification” (CD, *Justicia* 5) but also “any dichotomy or dualism between the natural and the supernatural” (CD, *Catequesis* 17). In this way an option was made for a theology of the temporal order and historical processes, a theology in which faith and social transformation imply one another mutually.

Thus the Concluding Document stated that “evangelization should be oriented toward the formation of a faith that is personal, adult, operative, and interiorly nourished” (CD, *Pastoral de las Élités* 13). Evangelization “should also be related to the ‘signs of the times.’ It cannot be atemporal or unhistorical. In fact, the ‘signs of the times,’ which on our continent are expressed especially in the social order, are appeals from God and therefore constitute a theological locus” (CD, *Pastoral de las Élités* 13). Concretely, the Concluding Document even recommended that Catholic “devotions and sacramentals should not lead the faithful to a type of semi-fatalist resignation but should rather educate them to their role as co-creators of their destiny with God” (CD, *Pastoral Popular* 12).

The Concluding Document offered a new key for interpretation which marked a breaking point with respect to traditional notions of the church’s evangelizing action and its mission in the world. The document recognized that “until now the Church has mainly practiced a ministry of conservation, based on sacramentalization” (CD, *Pastoral Popular* 1). The newness of Medellín resulted from combining a “People of God” ecclesiology with an integral, historical soteriology, so that the church could understand itself to be “God’s People *in the middle* of the peoples of this earth,” called to promote and accompany, in a horizontal relationship, the processes of social development of all the earth’s persons and peoples. The church responds to this call through its evangelizing action, which

should always manifest the profound unity that exists between God’s salvific project, realized in Christ, and the deepest aspirations of humankind; between the history of salvation and human history; between the Church as People of God and the temporal communities; between the revelatory action of God and the experience of human beings; between supernatural charisms and human values. (CD, *Catequesis* 4; emphasis mine)

One of the *periti* at the conference, Lucio Gera, elaborates:

Not only did Medellín integrate the task of promoting liberation and justice among people into the Church’s mission, but it also placed special *emphasis* on that task. Medellín made that task a priority, and it is important to understand the implications of that . . . We should understand this stress in relation to the clearly dominant tendency at Medellín, which was to conceive of human promotion and evangelization not simply as juxtaposed tasks but as tasks intimately united with one another. This means an evolution in the concept of evangelization and also a very definite—and evangelically determined—vision of the task of human promotion.⁷³

73. Lucio Gera, “Evangelización y promoción humana,” in *Escritos teológico-pastorales de Lucio Gera. 2. De la Conferencia de Puebla a nuestros días (1982–2007)*, ed. Virginia Azcuy, Carlos Galli, and José Carlos Caamaño (Buenos Aires: Ágape, 2007), 305; emphasis mine.

A fragmented reading of the Concluding Document makes it impossible to capture the intricate logical connections that give the reflection its unity and significance. The whole document must be read with three fundamental criteria in mind: (a) understanding the history of salvation as the work of liberating humankind from all servitude (CD, *Introducción* 4); (b) understanding liberation as the anticipation of full redemption in Christ (CD, *Educación* 9); (c) understanding the church as a sign of liberation in virtue of its human promotion of the poor, which must be a fundamental thrust of its evangelizing action (CD, *Pobreza de la Iglesia* 11). This historical-eschatological thrust imparts dynamism to the church's identity and mission; it is an expression of a historical, contextual soteriology, according to which the church has the mission of being the sacrament of salvation-liberation. In this role the church as People of God ministers to the other peoples of this earth.

Medellín therefore insisted that a mature faith, which should be the end result of the evangelizing process, needs to be translated into the ability to read the signs of the times "which are expressed above all in the social order" (CD, *Pastoral de las Élites* 13), for these are the "signs from God" to which we must respond by "promoting social justice" (CD, *Justicia* 5) as a function of integral development. Thus "evangelization, understood now as promoting a mature stage of faith, calls all Christians to commit themselves to promoting human flourishing."⁷⁴ It is thanks to Medellín that liberation, human promotion, and the church's specific action (that is, its evangelizing, missionary character) became essentially united.

Synodal Ecclesiality and Social Solidarity

The important ecclesial innovation of the Medellín conference was its great insistence on the need for the church to speak out strongly and to take responsibility for present-day society by engaging directly with the neediest and most marginalized sectors of society (CD, *Educación* 1). Accordingly, at Medellín the bishops committed themselves to "defending, according to the Gospel mandate, the rights of the poor and the oppressed" (CD, *La Paz* 22), and they based their actions on a holistic plan of liberation and integral development, counting on the close collaboration of generous individuals, intermediate civic associations, and important members of the political and economic sectors.

Medellín insistently affirmed an ecclesial position which viewed the people themselves as an instance of God's revelation and which saw collaborators as sharing responsibility for creating a just future for the peoples of the earth. The process of reforming structures therefore required that the church commit its works to the service of the impoverished sectors of society. The church had to reaffirm its commitment to the fight against poverty in order to create a more humane society (CD, *Justicia* 3). The institution had to proceed in a way that would allow it to be "authentically poor, missionary and paschal, divorced from all temporal power, and boldly committed to the liberation of each and every human being" (CD, *Juventud* 15).

74. Gera, "Evangelización y promoción humana," 311.

The People of God model, which the council had considered central for understanding the church's identity and mission in the contemporary world, was received at Medellín and further channeled into two mutually related courses of action: (a) exercising synodal ecclesiality and (b) promoting social solidarity. Putting these two ecclesial thrusts into action required "change of structures, transformation of attitude, and conversion of hearts" (CD, *La Paz* 14). That was the great challenge, and it was one that had to exclude all dualism between faith and daily life, between participating in church and living in society (CD, *Catechesis* 4).

The first thrust, synodal ecclesiality or the church's synodal way of proceeding, was to emerge from within and from below (base communities and parishes), and it moved upward (hierarchical-charismatic structuring). All the while there must be "unity in mission and diversity of charisms, services, and functions" (CD, *Sacerdotes* 7) so that there could be a differentiated participation of the People of God. This differentiation was not hierarchical but horizontal and reciprocal, involving all church members by reason of "Christ's triple function as prophet, priest, and king" in every baptized person (CD, *Iglesia visible* 8). Such an arrangement would make possible the synodal way of proceeding, by which each member contributes something to the others in complementary fashion. Thus would arise the "laity's commitment to working for liberation and humanization in the world" (CD, *Iglesia visible* 9.13) and an appropriate "co-responsibility between bishops and priests" (CD, *Sacerdotes* 15). This way of proceeding defined the base, so that

ministries involving pastoral, episcopal, and priestly functions should always be exercised in a collegial spirit, with bishops and priests always acting as members of a body (the episcopal college and the presbyteral college, respectively) and giving good example of communion, *facti gregis*. (CD, *Pastoral de Conjunto* 7)

Acknowledging frankly that there still existed mentalities and structures that impeded synodal ecclesiality, Medellín requested that "every revision of ecclesial structures, insofar as they are reformable, should be done to satisfy the demands of concrete historical situations, but also with a view to the nature of the Church" (CD, *Pastoral de Conjunto* 5). Structures are meaningful when they allow for "fraternal participation in the common dignity of the children of God" (CD, *Pastoral de Conjunto* 6) and when they produce "harmonious action" (CD, *Pastoral de Conjunto* 7).

As the conference assumed that the People of God model of church would take the concrete form of Christian base communities, these communities were described as "the first and fundamental ecclesial nuclei which should take responsibility, at their level, for enriching and expanding the faith and also for celebrating the ceremonies which are the expression of that faith." Above all, the communities constituted the "initial cells of ecclesial structure both for evangelization and for human promotion and development" (CD, *Pastoral de Conjunto* 10).

In this context the parish was conceived as a "pastoral complex that enlivens and unifies the base communities" (CD, *Pastoral de Conjunto* 13). The parish thus has meaning not in itself as a closed entity but as a community of communities—just as the universal church is one institution among others in society and contributes to their

development. Moreover, “Christians should experience the communion to which they have been called in their base communities, . . . [and these] should be organized in a way that allows fraternal and personal relations among their members” (CD, *Pastoral de Conjunto* 10). The conference stressed that “communities should be formed in a way that allows members to have sense of belonging” (CD, *Pastoral Popular* 13), a quality that is lost when a parish is only a specific geographical territory.

The second ecclesial thrust, that of social solidarity, committed the church to actions in favor of a participative society made up of “personalized” people⁷⁵ who are aware of the sociopolitical dimension of their faith. The church should “inspire, encourage, and promote, a new order of justice which engages all men and women in the running of their own communities” (CD, *Justicia* 16). This commitment would require “the creation of mechanisms of participation and legitimate representation of the people, or if necessary, the creation of new forms” at the level of “municipal and communal organization” (CD, *Justicia* 16). In this way Medellín recognized the poor as agents of their own future and as in no way as passive pawns. This vision was the fruit of an appealing theology of creation which envisioned human beings as “co-creators and co-managers with God of their own destiny” (CD *Pastoral Popular* 12).

The organizational model proposed by Medellín gave expression to the specifically continental reception of the church as People of God. It did not correspond to ideologies which gave “primacy to capital” or favored “totalitarian concentrations of state power” (CD, *Justicia* 10). Rather, it was inspired by the incarnate solidarity of Jesus with historical reality as a “theological locus and an appeal from God” (CD, *Pastoral de las Élités* 13). Discernment was to be done “by the light of the Gospel” (CD, *Justicia* 3) in order to discover the footsteps of God and witness “his presence as desirous of saving the whole human being, soul and body” (CD, *Introducción* 5). Following the council’s lead, Medellín recalled that “to know God, it is necessary to know humanity” and that “Christ is the one in whom the mystery of humanity is made manifest” (CD, *Introducción* 1; *Justicia* 4). Thus, anthropology, Christology, and soteriology become unified in a dynamic theology of the historical, temporal realm; this is a theology which always makes manifest

the profound unity that exists between the salvific project of God, realized in Christ, and the aspirations of humankind; between the history of salvation and human history; between the Church as People of God and the communities of secular society; between the revelatory action of God and the lived experience of human beings. (CD, *Catequesis* 4)

The Immediate Reception of Medellín in the Universal Magisterium

Within two years of the Medellín conference, Pironio delivered a discourse on “Liberation Theology” at the Meeting of Presidents and Secretaries of Episcopal Education

75. Medellín understands *people* as “co-creators and co-managers with God of their own destiny.” Medellín, Concluding Document, *Pastoral Popular* 12. This process of co-participation with God is a process of personalization or humanization of people’s lives.

Commissions, which was held in Medellín from August 27 to September 2, 1970. He began by stating that the idea of liberation was “the theological key of all the documents”⁷⁶ which refer to “the salvific design of God,”⁷⁷ because “in salvation history the divine work is an *action of integral liberation and human promotion* in every possible dimension.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, it was not “simply a question of developing certain (economic or social) possibilities so that people would *have more*. Rather, it was a question of radically changing the unjust structures that prevent people from *being more*”⁷⁹—more in human qualities, more in political participation, more in socioeconomic well-being.

Pironio’s words enunciate one of the hermeneutical themes that would mark all Latin American theology and pastoral ministry: persons should be recognized as *subjects*, which means that “every radical and profound change of structures must happen *from deep within*, with the effective participation of all involved, and with the corresponding interior transformation.”⁸⁰

This close relation between evangelization and liberation was incorporated into the universal magisterium in 1971, as enunciated in the declaration issued by the Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Justice in the World. The synod asserted clearly that the church is called to respond to the new signs of the times, as *Gaudium et Spes* requested, by “preaching the Good News to the poor, liberation to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted.”⁸¹ The synod understood that these actions of preaching, liberating, and consoling derive from the church’s christological vocation and not from a political option. Fidelity to the Gospel “entails a summons to the people to be converted from sin to the Father’s love, to universal solidarity, and therefore to demanding justice in the world.

Used here as a synonym of salvation, liberation was presented with two facets: (a) the promotion of human beings that results from economic increase and sociopolitical participation;⁸² and (b) the development of peoples, resulting in their liberation from all forms of colonialism. Regarding both facets, the synod adopted the theses of Medellín.

The idea of liberation was also taken up at the Third General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1975 under the theme “Evangelization of the Contemporary World.”⁸³ At that meeting bishops from all over the world treated the theme of liberation as an essential function of the church’s evangelizing work in every culture. Pironio stressed the need for a new evangelization based firmly on three pillars: (a)

76. Eduardo F. Pironio, “Teología de la Liberación,” *Teología*, no. 17 (1970): 12.

77. Pironio, “Teología de la Liberación,” 10.

78. Pironio, “Teología de la Liberación,” 11; emphasis mine.

79. Pironio, “Teología de la Liberación,” 10; emphasis mine.

80. Pironio, “Teología de la Liberación,” 11; emphasis mine.

81. *II Asamblea General del Sínodo de los Obispos*, 1971, 5, <https://www1.villanova.edu/content/dam/villanova/mission/JusticeIntheWorld1971.pdf>.

82. “It is impossible to conceive of true human promotion without first recognizing—within the political option adopted—the need for development that results from a combination of economic growth and participation.” *II Asamblea General del Sínodo de los Obispos*, 18.

83. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, *Evangelización, desafío de la Iglesia. Sínodo de 1974: documentos papales y sinodales. Presencia del CELAM y del Episcopado Latinoamericano* (Bogotá: CELAM documentos, 1976).

announcing the praxis of Jesus, (b) proclaiming the transformative power of the Kingdom, and (c) calling the people to ecclesial conversion.⁸⁴ For this same synod, the very credibility of the church required that it announce the Gospel as sociohistorical and cultural liberation because “unless the Christian message of love and justice shows its effectiveness through action for justice in the world, the message will gain credibility among the men and women of our time only with great difficulty.”⁸⁵

The synod’s conclusions were incorporated by Paul VI into his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which distinguished three types of liberation: *anthropological* (based on recognition of the concrete social and economic problems of every human subject), *theological* (since there is no redemption without justice), and *evangelical* (since love of neighbor implies growth in humanity).⁸⁶ The exhortation states, “It is impossible to accept ‘that in evangelization one could or should ignore the importance of the problems so much discussed today, concerning justice, liberation, development, and peace in the world’” (*EN* 31). In keeping with the conciliar spirit, the exhortation makes it plain that there can be no salvation without the integral liberation of human beings from everything that oppresses them and prevents them from flourishing (*EN* 9). To the contrary, ignoring such liberation “would be to forget the lesson which comes to us from the Gospel concerning love of our neighbor who is suffering and in need.”⁸⁷ As Pironio had already made clear, the struggle for liberation is integral to our following of Jesus and our making an option that finds “its full meaning in the light of Christ and his Paschal Mystery: in the realization of integral salvation in time, in the totality of humankind and human history, which is in permanent tension with the eschatological consummation.”⁸⁸

Concluding Note

Medellín represented the Latin American church’s ratification of *Gaudium et Spes* within the People of God ecclesiology that flowed from *Lumen Gentium*.⁸⁹ The simultaneous reception of the social magisterium of Paul VI, especially through *Populorum*

84. “Pironio displayed the Latin American Church’s paschal face, signed with the cross and with hope; the centrality of evangelization; the richness of Catholic popular religiosity; the commitment to integral liberation; the impetus of youth ministry; the novelty of the base ecclesial communities; the emergence of new ministries; and the treasure of Latin American Marian devotion, which he practiced with great love toward the Virgin of Luján and expressed beautifully in his famous prayer to Our Lady of America. He declared that we were at the start of a new evangelization.” Carlos María Galli, “En la Iglesia sopra un viento del sur,” *Teología*, no. 108 (2012): 114.

85. *II Asamblea General del Sínodo de los Obispos*, 35.

86. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), 29, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html (hereafter cited as *EN*).

87. Pablo VI, *Discurso en la apertura de la III Asamblea General del Sínodo de los Obispos*, September 27, 1974, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 66 (1974), in *EN*.

88. Pironio, “Teología de la Liberación,” 12.


89. Cf. Rafael Luciani, “Los signos de los tiempos como criterio hermenéutico fundamental del quehacer teológico,” *Atualidade Teológica* 52 (2016): 37–57.

Progressio, provided the hermeneutical framework for reading the specifically Latin American signs of the times, which was done by applying the see–judge–act method. The *Documento final* presented a critical vision of the global structures which negatively affect human development, especially of the poor, and which attack the integrity of the peoples and their cultures.

The primacy of the Gospel, which returns to what is most essential in the following of Jesus, is one of the great challenges in any attempt to reform the ecclesiastical institution in our day. Just as Medellín summoned Christians to be “converted to the kingdom of justice, love, and peace” (CD, *Justicia* 3), so Pope Francis today calls them to experience “pastoral conversion” through reform of structures and mentalities. What this requires, in the spirit of Medellín (CD, *Pastoral de Conjunto* 34), is viewing the poor and the marginalized as subjects of their own history and development, as actors and protagonists of the changes to come, and never as objects or instruments of anybody (CD, *Paz* 14). This evangelical perspective is one of the most important contributions of Latin American theology. Francis follows this same line when he states that the subject of the historical process “is the people as a whole and their whole culture, not a single class, minority, group or elite.”⁹⁰ This option for the poor as the active subjects of change is the only path by which social transformations can be viable and lasting, and lead to a “true peace” (CD, *Paz* 1).

The question posed at Medellín, about where God’s salvific action is taking place today (CD, *Introducción* 6), is perhaps more valid in our time than ever. Indeed, it defines our vocation in the world. The option for the excluded and for the newly emerging social subjects takes on new dimensions today because of the enormous difficulties people encounter in achieving a just and equitable development. The theological discernment of reality bequeathed to us by Medellín is the expression of an adult church, converted now into an “Iglesia fuente” (a wellspring church),⁹¹ true to the conciliar spirit. It is a church which understands that human subjects “are defined principally by their responsibility before history toward their sisters and brothers” (GS 55) and by their struggle for “greater personalization and greater fraternal cohesion” in that history (CD, *Introducción* 4).

ORCID iD

Rafael Luciani  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5067-2054>

Author biography

Rafael Luciani (STD, Gregorian Pontifical University), is a Venezuelan theologian who holds professorships at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Caracas, and the School of Theology and Ministry of Boston College. He is a member of the Pastoral Theological Team of CELAM. Recent books include *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (Orbis, 2017) and *Retornar a Jesus de Nazaré: Conhecer Deus e o ser humano através da vida de Jesus* (Vozes: Rio de Janeiro, 2017).

90. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html, 239.

91. Henrique C. de Lima Vaz, “Igreja-reflexo Vs. Igreja-fonte,” *Cadernos brasileiros* 46 (1968), 17–22.