

## Current Events in Latin America (1972-1980) *Enrique Dussel (Mexico)*

*"We must call by its correct name injustice, human exploitation of human beings, and the exploitation of human beings by the state, institutions, and the mechanisms of systems and regimes."*

*-Pope John Paul II (Weekly General Audience,  
February 21, 1979)*

In the same address to a General Audience Pope John Paul II said that "liberation, in the social sense too, begins with real knowledge of the truth." We must take cognizance of the historical moment through which we are living. Now if that is correct, then we would do well to devote our attention, however cursorily,<sup>1</sup> to the recent past. Hopefully we may discover the *meaning* of what has been happening in recent Latin American history, which is filled with key events.

### **INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS**

#### ***Stages in the History of the Latin American Church***

The history of the Latin American church has three main stages, which I shall briefly describe here:

*a.* Colonial Christendom (1492-1808). The life of the church was framed within a social structure in which the mode of capitalist production, dependent on Spain and Portugal, exercised hegemony over the other means of production.

*b.* Christendom in crisis (1808-1950). Latin America was dependent on Anglo-Saxon capitalism, on an industrial revolution taking place at the "center."

During this period the church sought a replacement for the "colonial" model. The search crystallized in the concrete model of New Christendom between 1930 and 1950.

c. The church of the common people, or "people's church " (*Iglesia popular*). This emerged into prominence gradually after 1950.

This third major stage has had four phases. The first phase ran from 1954-59 (the fall of Vargas in Brazil, Castro's entry into Havana, the announcement and meeting of Vatican II) to 1968 (the Medellin Conference). The second phase ran from the time of the Medellin Conference to the fourteenth regular assembly of CELAM in Sucre, i.e., from 1968 to 1972. The third phase ran from the Sucre Conference to the Puebla Conference ( 1973 to 1979). Now we are in the fourth phase, which includes the CELAM elections of March 1979, the changes in the officials of the NCBP (National Conference of Brazilian Bishops) and, in/particular, the success of the Nicaraguan revolution on July 19.

### ***The Old Christendom in Crisis and the Search for New "Models "***

Christendom was one "model" of the *relationship* that might exist between the church on the one hand and political society (essentially the state or government) and civil society on the other.<sup>2</sup> In this model the church defined its pastoral relations with the people in civil society through the state. The best example of this model was provided by the *Laws of the Indies* (1681) promulgated for Spanish America. The Portuguese system of *patroado* functioned in much the same way. The church made use of the state to build its churches, send out its missionaries, protect its holdings, publish its books, educate its agents, and so forth. In turn, the state received from the church legitimation for its coercive domination of civil society (the creoles, Indians, black slaves, etc.). This model came into crisis in the process of winning emancipation from Spain and Portugal.

It was not until the crisis of 1930, when the dependent, liberalist, mercantile oligarchy was seriously undermined, that the church was able to reinstate a model of positive relations with the populist state. It was an imperfect model compared with the old colonial one, and now the domestic or national bourgeoisie exercised hegemony. The newer imperfect model also made use of the state (to promote religious instruction in the public schools, for example) and in turn legitimated the government by helping to create a consensus. We may call this later model "New Christendom." The church broadened its base because it was able to make contact with groups of workers and marginal people, who were necessary allies of populism.

The crisis of this New Christendom model came with the crisis of populism itself, which entailed an effort to achieve an autonomous national capitalism. This was the objective of Irigoyen, Vargas, Cardenas, Perón, and many others like them. Around that time ( 1954) a brief period of developmentalism

began. In Brazil, for example, it ran from 1954 to 1964. But then it necessarily gave way to the National Security State and an economy in which the multinationals exercised hegemony. Faced with the crisis of capitalism around 1967, contradictions sharpened and the authoritarian state shifted to direct repression of the people. But on the other side something strategically more important had been taking place since 1959: i.e. , the socialist revolution in Cuba. This, too, resulted from the crisis of populism, exemplified by Batista in the case of Cuba. Both the National Security State and the socialist state placed obstacles in the way of the New Christendom model.

Compelled by the critical circumstances, some churches (e.g. , those of Brazil, El Salvador, and Nicaragua) undertook the search for another model. In the new model the church abandoned the illusion of trying to carry out the process of evangelization through the state. It gave definitive definition to its place in civil society and now established an alliance with the oppressed classes. It could no longer expect help from the state in carrying out its pastoral tasks; it therefore had to create new institutions, such as the base-level ecclesial communities (CCBs). By the same token, however, it no longer gave legitimation to the state's repressive actions. This break with the practice of legitimating the existing political society opened up new room for winning credibility among the oppressed people. This new model is already being lived by prophetic groups, and a majority of some episcopates have already adopted it. It is what has come to be known as the *Iglesia popular* (People's church, church of the common people, and equivalent terms). It is not a different church or a new church; it is simply a new model of the age-old church.

## THE SUCRE PHASE (1972)

### *Sociopolitical Context*

The model of dependent capitalism under a National Security State spread through Latin America. Here are the key dates:

March 31, 1964: Coup d'état in Brazil.

August 21, 1971: Coup d'état in Bolivia.

June 27, 1973: Dissolution of the Uruguayan Congress.

September 11, 1973: Coup d'état in Chile.

August 28, 1975: Francisco Morales Bermúdez in Peru.

January 13, 1976: Fall of the nationalist military government in Ecuador.

March 24, 1976: Fall of Isabel Perón in Argentina.

To these events we can add the continuing rule of Stroessner in Paraguay, Duvalier in Haiti, Balaguer in Santo Domingo, military dictatorships

masked as democracies in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and Somoza in Nicaragua. The reality of Latin America had indeed taken on a somber aspect. It was the counter-insurgency model, the National-Security model, proposed by Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. From the economic standpoint the crisis that began in 1967 would ameliorate in 1972-73, then turn into the worst crisis faced by the capitalist system since 1929. Inflation combined with recession to produce "stagflation" in 1974-75. The doctrine of the Chicago School, led by Milton Friedman, was implemented by the various neo-fascist dictatorships. Multinationals gained complete hegemony over national economies. The monetary position of the IMF raised national debts to astronomical levels.

In addition, the center-versus-periphery relationship was now duplicated insofar as certain peripheral countries (e.g., Brazil, Mexico, India, and Iran) were defined as centers of development enjoying hegemony over other underdeveloped countries that were poorer still.

The expansion of international capital and the new technological domination called for a state or a government with a coherent ideology. This fact was voiced by Augusto Pinochet at the sixth Assembly of the OAS in Santiago (1976):

Western and Christian civilization, of which we form a non-renounceable part, is internally debilitated and under attack from outside. The ideological war, which jeopardizes the sovereignty of free governments and the essential dignity of the human being, leaves no room for comfortable forms of neutralism. Meanwhile, in the domestic political life of various countries we are experiencing the ideological and social aggression of a doctrine that conceals its objective of imposing communist tyranny under the cloak of a pretended proletarian redemption.

This alleged situation gave rise to an integral doctrine of Total War at every level, including political strategy, economic policy, psychosocial factors, and military activity. The doctrine of National Security, which appeared in the United States after World War II, was now used by military leaders in Latin America to pave the way politically and structurally for capitalist expansion from the center.

The political aim was the systematic repression of the people. The economic aim was to maintain the profit rate of foreign capital investments.

### ***Ecclesial Context***

The most important papal document in this phase was the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, issued December 8, 1975, as the conclusion of many ecclesial events relating to this theme.

It appears that the crisis of capitalism during this period caused an atmos-

phere of pessimism to prevail in Italy. Simultaneously the emergence of Eurocommunism and the progress of the Communist Party in Italy created fear among certain ecclesiastical groups. In any case Pope Paul VI expressed himself clearly:

We all know very well in what terms many bishops from every continent, particularly those of the Third World, spoke during the recent (1974) Synod of Bishops. ...As we now know, those [Third World] peoples are investing all their energy in the effort and the fight to overcome all those things that condemn them to live on the perimeter of life. ... The church has the duty to proclaim liberation to millions of human beings. ...to help bring this liberation about (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, no.30).

At the 1974 Synod, the bishops of Latin America were no longer talking in the terms they had used at the previous Synod, but neither did they come to any conclusion. They simply drafted a message of commitment. At the fifth Synod of Bishops in 1977, however, it was clear that the line adopted at their Sucre Conference had borne its fruits. It marked the start of a reaction whose effects would be seen at the Puebla Conference. One bishop from El Salvador remarked at the Synod that "in his country priests were becoming Communists or Maoists."<sup>3</sup> "One Spanish prelate remarked that the positions of the Latin American church marked an open retreat from those of the Medellin Conference."<sup>4</sup> Archbishop Alfonso Lopez Trujillo repeatedly stressed that "Christian liberation need not necessarily be a politicizing liberation."<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile the Jesuits had held their thirty-second Extraordinary Congregation in Rome (1973). Their conclusion was that they should place "the Company at the service of the church in this period of rapid world change and respond to the challenge posed to us by that world." An option for justice was one of their firmly chosen priorities.

Changes had also taken place in the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace. "The officials of the Commission have decided to do without the services of forty international experts."<sup>6</sup> The curial Congregations had triumphed in determining what basic direction the postconciliar church would take.

In Germany the periodical *Publik*, under the sponsorship of progressive, critical-minded lay people, was closed down. In the United States Father Louis Colonnese was relieved of his job. He had done a brilliant job of running the Catholic Interamerican Cooperation Program (CICOP) and helping Latin America by showing North Americans the situation of poverty that they were creating in Latin America. The very emergence of Archbishop LeFebvre embodied an ecclesial reaction, a backlash opposed to the underlying reforms proposed by Vatican II.

This whole atmosphere reached Latin America toward the end of 1972.

***Sucre (November 15-23, 1972)***

The fourteenth ordinary conference of CELAM met in Sucre in 1972. Four principal matters were on the agenda: "The overall restructuring of CELAM, the replacement of its officers, the future of the specialized institutes and the financing of their activities, and the chief guidelines governing pastoral work on the continent."<sup>7</sup> Press reports at the time indicated that "CELAM, from Sucre on, will be an organism moving in the most conservative channels. This prediction is based on the fact that various Latin American episcopates have called into question the activities and pastoral approaches pursued by some departments of CELAM. Bishops from Colombia and our own country [i.e., Argentina], among others, have not concealed their displeasure over some of the undertakings sponsored by the organism."<sup>8</sup>

A similar comment came from Hector Borrat, a Christian journalist and intellectual: "The most recent attacks against Segundo Galilea, IPLA, and CEHILA were bound to reach a crescendo in one final assault. It came at Sucre, where CELAM met from November 15 to 23. It was not a reunion. It was the long-awaited and planned-for occasion when the Right hoped to topple the Medellín men. Would they manage, through the election of different officials, to finally effect the change of direction they sought, to derail the Latin American episcopate from the track they had laid in 1968 and followed since then?"<sup>9</sup>

These various commentaries written before and during the Sucre sessions give a good indication of the spirit that prevailed at the Sucre Conference. Elected Secretary General of CELAM was Archbishop Alfonso Lopez Trujillo. Bishop Luciano Duarte became President of the Department of Social Action, and Bishop Antonio Quarricino took over the Department of the Laity.

Some ten or more German theologians later issued a *Memorandum* in which they spoke about a campaign against liberation theology. The campaign actually formed part of the backdrop for the Sucre Conference. Said the German theologians: "Insofar as the Latin American episcopate is concerned, some bishops support the campaign against liberation theology. ... On the German side, the Bishop of Essen is a main figure in this campaign."<sup>10</sup> Theologians such as Professors Weber, Rauscher, and Bossier, well-known in their own countries for their conservative stances, formed a group known as "Church and Liberation, " to attack Latin American liberation theology. One of the group went so far as to describe liberation theology as "irrational obscurantism ."

There is only one point that might be added here. At the very least these criticisms of the ecclesial course that emerged at the Medellín Conference, of liberation theology and the church's option for the poor, certainly helped along the National Security States and the repressive plans of the U .S. State

Department. The physiognomy of our continent would be altered by violent coup d'états directed against processes of liberation. The church was left without a critical voice, looking on silently at the countless horrors perpetrated in the name of "Western and Christian civilization."

The theological backdrop for the reaction against Medellín and the ensuing debate found expression in the following text:

It is clear that we cannot confuse or equate material poverty with spiritual poverty. People can be poor in economic wealth without being poor in spirit. This is true of those who deify money and covet the riches they don't possess. On the opposite side of the coin, we cannot neglect the cases where people rich in material things are in fact authentic *anawim*, or, people poor in spirit.<sup>11</sup>

So when poor people demand more pay, or when peasants demand their own land to farm—because the plantation owner is robbing them—they are to be classed among those poor people who covet wealth; and hence they are lost. On the other hand, a landowning millionaire who "feels" or "thinks" that he is independent of his wealth, is now one of the poor in spirit. The inversion is complete. The gospel message has been emptied of all content so that it can be filled up with the ideology of dependent capitalism. Since 1972 the issue at stake in the Latin American church was whether the capitalist project for the continent should be criticized or legitimated. The Sucre Conference criticized liberation theology, the Latin American Pastoral Institute (IPLA), and the church's option for the poor. Thus the church was left without a critical voice on the continental level, though not on local or national levels.

#### ECCLESIAL EVENTS FROM SUCRE TO PUEBLA: 1973-1979

During this period a wave of terror broke over the Latin American church. During these five years the holy bride of Christ, the church, would offer more martyrs to Christian communities and the heavenly Jerusalem than it had in almost five centuries of existence on this continent. In and through those groups that united as a people, as the authentic people of God, the church has borne witness to the gospel message in a way that marks deep and profound growth. It can be truly said that this period, steeped in pain, bloodshed, and killing, marks a glorious epoch for Christianity in Latin America.

Here I shall present a typology of the various situations in which the Latin American church finds itself. My aim is to enable people to see the distinct moments and the differing challenges facing Christians, which in turn are due to changing political and economic conditions. For lack of space I shall content myself with quick brushstrokes and schematic descriptions.

***The Church in Authoritarian, Repressive Regimes  
(Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Haiti, Paraguay)***

Since it stands as a Latin American hallmark of the situation created by our repressive governments, we cannot overlook the seizure and confinement of seventeen Latin American bishops (including four Chicano bishops from the United States) in Riobamba, Ecuador, on August 12, 1976. The bishops had come from a meeting in Brazil dealing with base-level ecclesial communities, and they were planning to discuss the situation of the church on the Latin American continent. Said one of the bishops: "If this is what happens to us, who are people of note, what will happen to peasants, workers, or native Indians when they are captured?"<sup>12</sup>

Here I shall consider only two of the five countries indicated. In Uruguay the situation is much like that in Argentina. In Haiti and Paraguay the present situation is much like that which has existed in the ruling government for more than twenty-five years (as was the case with Somoza in Nicaragua until he was overthrown), but it does not specifically match the National Security model of Brazil.

In *Chile* the bloody coup of September 11, 1973, marked the violent end of the only form of socialism established by the electoral process. This type of repression has no parallel in Latin America. A real "theology of massacre" inspired the military men, who made much of being Christians.<sup>13</sup> Even more regrettable was the fact that two days later, on September 13, the Chilean episcopate published a document condemning the Christians for Socialism movement. The document was entitled "Christian Faith and Political Activity."<sup>14</sup> In it one can clearly ascertain the type of political project envisioned by most of the church hierarchy: i.e., that of the Christian Democratic Party. It was necessary to make it clear and obvious that the Popular Unity Front and Marxism were to be condemned, so that the church could establish some sort of autonomy vis-à-vis the new dictatorial government.

Some bishops came out in favor of the Junta: e.g., Tagle of Valparaiso, Fresno of La Serena, Vicuña of Puerto Montt, and Valdés of Osorno. Others expressed reservations: e.g., Camus, the new secretary of the episcopate, Hourton, Ariztia, González, and Piñera. The cardinal held to a middle position, much to the disgust of the new government, which wanted his support; but he was not explicitly critical either. What irritated the government the most was the Committee of Cooperation for Peace, presided over by Bishop Ariztia in the name of the episcopate. The organization was managed jointly by the Lutheran bishop, Helmut Frenz, and Father Salas, a Jesuit. After enormous pressure had been exerted, the organism was dissolved. A more ecclesiastical institution was then organized, the Vicariate of Solidarity. This sort of institution exemplifies a church maintaining some degree of relative autonomy vis-à-vis the totalitarian state. But the Chilean church is not maintaining this autonomy solely in the interests of a commitment to the poor, as

could be said of the church in Brazil, El Salvador, and Bolivia now and then. The Chilean church is also holding on to the New Christendom model as something to be implemented in the future, when the present dictatorship gives away to the Christian Democrat party. It cannot be said that the Chilean church has gotten beyond that model, though it has become a national institution providing a certain amount of space for critical thinking. This explains why members of the Popular Unity front have changed their judgment regarding the historical function of the church in Latin American social formations.

In *Argentina* the situation grew increasingly tense and anxious around 1973. This atmosphere was quickly heightened with the death of Juan D. Peron in 1974. The military coup of March 26, 1976, did not produce any fundamental change, since López Rega had been fomenting dependence and repression already under the rule of Isabel Peron.

If anything will stand out in the history of the church *during* this period, the violent, bloody repression of the people certainly is it. Numerous Christians suffered the same fate: e.g., Father Carlos Mugica, assassinated at the door of his little neighborhood church on May 11, 1974; and the Bishop of Rioja, Enrique Angelelli, assassinated on August 4, 1976.

The cause of so much martyrdom must be sought in an economic model favoring dependence on North American capitalism. In this most recent phase the policy was directed by Martínez de Hoz, the government minister, who defined the country as an agricultural producer and exporter. The purchasing power of wages was diminished to ensure greater profitability for foreign multinational capital. The result was that increasing social pressure was exerted by a class-conscious working class. The ongoing mobilization is immediately repressed by institutional violence. The saddest part of it all is the fact that the hierarchical church still accepts the New Christendom model. It remains allied to the government and the dominant classes, even though the national bourgeoisie is in a state of crisis along with the petty bourgeoisie, its staunchest membership. Thus the hierarchical church condemns the guerrilla movement as the source of all evils, failing to see that it is merely the product of earlier injustice in both historical and structural terms. It was not hard to guess what the position of the episcopal delegation from Argentina would be at the Puebla Conference, and all the participants and observers at the Conference regarded the Argentinian bishops as the most conservative group there.

***The Church and the Relative "Opening Up "***  
***in Peru, Brazil, Panama, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Santo Domingo***

The "open" stance of the Carter government has fostered a certain policy of "opening up" (*apertura*) since 1976. This was not foreseeable in 1972. So I have grouped together here the various countries that represent a situation of relatively greater freedom in 1980. I will deal specifically with only two coun-

tries, although the situation in the other countries is most interesting, particularly in Bolivia and Santo Domingo.

In *Peru* the situation never went so far as it did in Chile or El Salvador. Nevertheless, since 1975 the government has been increasingly inclined to adopt the authoritarianism of dependent fascism. The forty-second assembly of bishops, held in 1973, gave indications of adopting the model of the people's church, though incompletely and indecisively:

The liberative mission of the church, which is effective proclamation of the gospel message, signifies a hope-filled option for all human beings, but especially for those who suffer from injustice-for the poor and oppressed.<sup>15</sup>

Peru is suffering in a special way from the rigors of the economic crisis of capitalism. One need only allude to the rigorist monetary policy of the IMF, which is in the service of international finance capital. The modernizing, reformist revolution of Velasco Alvarado ended in frank retreat and forced submission to North American demands. The people suffered the consequences, mobilized, and were repressed. The people-oriented church is fighting alongside the oppressed classes; but it is still a minority faction, even though a representative one. The church is feeling pressure from the state, but the bishops have said: "We renew this loyalty and fidelity precisely at a time when there is danger that the orientations of the Medellin Conference will be forgotten."<sup>16</sup>

Some Peruvian bishops, theologians, and lay people would play a relevant role in Puebla, thanks to their experience and adopted course.

In *Brazil* the crisis of capitalism at the center and, in particular, the oil shortage had serious repercussions. The "Brazilian model" entered into contradictions in its country of origin precisely at the time when the model was becoming generalized throughout Latin America. Brazil's foreign debt rose by 3.5 million dollars in 1974. The Geisel government needed a certain degree of consensus and so it created room for greater freedom. The church moved with determination into this newly created room, courageously exercising leadership in the service of the people.

The many martyrs have not been rejected by the church, but rather accepted and put forward as witnesses to the gospel message. By their deaths Fathers Henrique Pereira Neto, Rodolfo Lunkenbeim, Joao Bosco Penido Burnier and many others bore witness to the church's break with the New Christendom model.

There is Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns of São Paulo on the urban, university, and laboring front; Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga in the backlands, supporting the peasant front; Bishop Tomas Balduino, President of CIMI (Indigenous Missionary Council), encouraging the native Indian front. It is a church standing tall against the militarist National Security State. Bishop Luis Fernandez is coordinating thousands of base-level ecclesial communities. Archbishop Helder Camara continues to be the prophet of denunciation.

There is Aloisio Lorscheider, the President of CELAM; and Ivo Lorscheiter, leading the CNBB toward a new model of church relations with the state and the dominant classes. Great personalities in a revitalized and revitalizing church!

The new model (not a new church) of a people's church found eloquent expression in the document issued by the bishops of the Northeast on May 6, 1973. It was entitled: "I Have Heard the Cries of My People." An equally impressive message was issued on the same date by the bishops of the Central West. It was entitled: "Marginalization of the People, Cry of the Churches."

In it we read:

Only the people of the backlands and the cities, in union and work, in faith and hope, can be the church of Christ that invites and works for liberation. It is only to the extent that we immerse ourselves in the waters of the gospel that we become church, church-people, people of God.<sup>17</sup>

In Latin America it is the Brazilian church-its decision-making institutional members at least-that has displayed the greatest autonomy vis-a-vis political society and the National Security State, and the closest rapprochement with the oppressed classes. Their option dovetails with the model of the people's church, but it is not devoid of ambiguity. For example, it gets support from the middle and lower bourgeoisie, as well as from the national bourgeoisie. This enables the church to talk about "national" liberation, but still within the context of capitalism. Does it ultimately come down to some form of Latin American populism?

### ***The Church in a Regressive Situation (Colombia)***

Only one Latin American country, Colombia, finds itself in a situation of "Uruguayization": i.e., a military dictatorship wearing the cloak of a civil government, as happened under Bordaberry in Uruguay. Formal democracy is less and less in control of the situation, and the institutional corruption of the regime is staggering. The church cannot abandon its traditional alliance, and it finds itself in crisis.

The "National Pact" of conservatives and liberals was passed on from Misael Pastrana to Alfonso López in 1974, and then to Julio Turbay in 1978. Applying the New Christendom model to perfection, the church has continued to be the legitimation of the system; but since 1978 it has adopted a certain critical distance.

The polarization of the church intensifies. On the one side Father Domingo Lain died as a guerrilla member of ELN on February 20, 1974. On the other side the cardinal formally received the Army's Order of Antonio Nariño on June 26, 1975, when a state of siege was declared; then, in June 1976, he was made a general of the Colombian army.

The most damnatory document of the decade in Latin America also came

from the Colombian episcopate. On November 21, 1976, it issued the document entitled: "Christian Identity in Action for Justice." This lengthy work, which undertook to judge and condemn by name individuals, periodicals, and movements, was viewed by some as a preliminary draft for what would be the initial consultative draft for the Puebla Conference. The Colombian document said that the causes behind so many ills in the Colombian church "were due mostly to outside influences."<sup>18</sup>

Are the priests and theologians of Colombia that incompetent, or are they foreigners in their own country perhaps? How can they choose not to see that the cause of all the people's mobilization and the committed involvement of priests and Christians is the structural injustice of the capitalist system?

In the Colombian church the two models of the church are clearly present and in conflict with each other. Most of the bishops uphold the New Christendom model. Some of the clergy and religious are coming to a theoretical understanding of the people's church model and trying to put it into practice. In any case a crisis would seem to be facing the old alliance with the dominant classes, and there is much uncertainty. This might lead to a military dictatorship of the National Security type, which would suit many members of the church. Or it might lead to a social democracy more grounded in the common people, though this seems difficult to achieve. The church does not face an easy future, and it does not seem that the people are getting any witness to poverty or ecclesial commitment to their interests.

***The Church vis-à-vis Formal Bourgeois Democracies  
(Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica)***

The church's situation in these countries is stable. There is no persecution because a conservative stance dominates its top men. There are no conflicts because no prophetism is to be found. I shall focus solely on the example of Mexico.

In *Mexico* the situation is very varied. On October 18, 1973, the episcopate issued an interesting document on "Christian Commitment vis-à-vis Social and Political Options."<sup>19</sup> It had no impact on the lack of Christian commitment at the level of worker and peasant life. Indeed the only conflicts of any significance between church and state were in the area of education. Private schooling is desired by the upper, middle, and lower bourgeoisie—the core of the parish membership. The obligatory and free textbooks that the government distributes to all schools, even Catholic ones, raised much discussion. A settlement was reached peacefully. The textbooks need not be used in the private schools, or at least some of them need not be.

The rapid construction of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, with the intervention of the government and the support of Mexico's major banks, was another event. Some interpreted it as a reconciliation between church and state; others saw it as the expropriation of the common people's Virgin by the dominant classes. There have been many clashes between priests and religious on the one hand and bishops on the other. These intramural conflicts

again testify to the existence of two ecclesial models. The New Christendom model is legally impossible in Mexico but possible in fact. For though the understanding between church and state is extra-legal, it could hardly be better. But the model of the people's church is growing among countless groups, communities, and parishes. They are involving themselves with the interests of the common people as embodied in marginal colonies, -peasants, and labor groups.

The assassination of Rodolfo Aguilar on March 21, 1977, pointed up the different ways of conceiving Christian witness that are now present in Mexico. Some hope to effect it some day through government power and authority. Others are already at work alongside the poor and oppressed, proclaiming the gospel message in poverty and simplicity.

***The Church in Pre-Revolutionary Situations  
(El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras)***

Central America has become the most critical juncture for Latin American capitalism. After centuries of oppression, the peasant population has begun to mobilize. The murder of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero (March 24, 1980) and the general strike called in his name three months later (June 24) have given El Salvador an opportunity to clarify the underlying positions. The Christian Democracy party met recently in Washington with representatives of Rightist groups and the State Department. It gives its support to a repressive regime that hopes to use modernizing reforms to forestall a thorough revolution of the Nicaraguan type. Here, even more clearly than in Chile and Venezuela, the Christian Democratic Party has made clear the role that it is playing in the present situation. But even in Chile and Venezuela it has been pro-developmentalism, pro-reformism, pro-capitalism, and pro-dependence on North American and European capitalism.

In *El Salvador* as in Guatemala and Honduras, the situation of the peasantry grows increasingly terrible. There is growing confrontation between the military dictatorships and the oppressed people. The SEDAC board, headed by Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, who was absent from Puebla, had this to say on June 24, 1977:

We deplore deeply the fact that in order to silence those who are working committedly in the social arena out of fidelity to Christ, people brand them as Communists, subversives, and proponents of wild doctrines, ...all this being done in flagrant violation of human rights.<sup>20</sup>

In El Salvador, peasant people were assassinated in 1974 in such places as San Francisco Chinameguita, La Cayetana, Tres Calles, Santa Barbara, Plaza de la Libertad in the capital, and so forth. Archbishop Chavez complained: "Here coffee is devouring human beings." He was alluding to the fact that the plantation owners were exploiting their peons.

One person who symbolizes the whole period is Father Rutilio Grande,

who was assassinated on March 12, 1977. This parish priest of Aguilares was not the only priest-martyr. On May 11 of the same year Father Alfonso Navarro fell; on November 28, 1978, Father Barrera Motto was martyred; and on January 20, 1979, Octavio Ortiz died. This does not include the many lay people killed in the same incidents. Alongside Father Ortiz, for example, the following lay people were killed by the Army in the parish of San Antonio Abad: David Caballero, 14; Angel Morales, 22; Roberto Orellana, 15; and Jorge Gómez, 22.<sup>21</sup>

On February 22, 1977, Oscar Romero took charge of his archdiocese. He soon displayed a courage rarely seen in the church, as he undertook to defend his people from paramilitary groups and the government itself. On March 5, 1977, his bishops declared: "This situation has to be called one of collective injustice and institutionalized violence."<sup>22</sup> This does not mean that there are no disagreements or contradictions. Whereas Archbishop Romero celebrated a liturgy over the corpse of Rutilio Grande, Bishop Pedro Aparicio supported the government and criticized both lay people and priests at the 1977 Synod of Bishops in Rome .

Some still have the New Christendom model on their minds. Others are already implementing the model of a people's church. That is why, as Archbishop Romero put it: "The church of El Salvador is finding itself obliged to go back to the days of the catacombs." The early church could not use the state as a pastoral go-between; nor could it establish an alliance with the dominant classes. Such is the case with the church in El Salvador.

Archbishop Romero's death as a martyr may perhaps endure as the symbol of the liberation struggle that Christians have undertaken in the second half of the twentieth century.

### ***The Church in Socialist Societies (Cuba, Nicaragua)***

The victory of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation in Nicaragua came on July 19, 1979. Thus began a new phase of church history in Latin America, and perhaps in the history of the universal church. For the first time in history a country moving slowly but surely toward a Latin American brand of socialism has succeeded in posing the question of religion in a positive, innovative, revolutionary manner. Quite obviously this is not just the result of pragmatic prudence on the part of the Front's leaders. It is also due to the revolutionary stance and active participation of thousands of Christians in the "war" against Somoza. Both before and after the revolution these Christians have taken an active part, many of them belonging to CCBs or other ecclesial or Christian institutions. Moreover, in contrast with Cuba in 1959, the Latin American church has progressed greatly in the past twenty years. The issue of religion has assumed strategic priority because of Christian grass roots praxis, the theology of liberation, and the committed involvement of many Christians in revolutionary movements. By virtue of its prophetic nature, Christianity will definitely not disappear in tomorrow's socialist society. It will probably bear fruit in new, revitalizing experiences.

The whole question is not only political but *theoretical*. Marxist thought must revise its theory of religion. Using its own categories and methodology, it will have to formulate a positive Marxist theory of religion. And obviously we Christians, like the Fathers of the Church when confronted with pagan Greek thought, will have to go to work on this major task. In Nicaragua some solution to this question must be worked out, or else decades will be wasted in trying to solve it.

But some Christians, including top-level hierarchical churchmen in Latin America, are trying to preach a conservative, reformist, anti-revolutionary brand of Christianity in Nicaragua. They are backed up by the hundreds of thousands of dollars supplied by certain American foundations, and by the efforts of priests and intellectuals who seek the triumph of a counter-revolution. The situation is serious, but Christianity will not lose this evangelizing battle. It will succeed in proclaiming the gospel message for a post-capitalist, Christian, Latin American society geared to the common people. Needless to say, this Christianity will no longer be identified with capitalism, private property, and the platform of Christian Democracy—all part of the system of capitalist dependence in Latin America.

The church in *Cuba* finds itself in a difficult situation. Under Batista the church cherished the idyllic dream of a New Christendom. It cost the church a great deal to abandon its class instincts and gradually get used to the irrevocable situation of living in a socialist country. The worst of the crisis had passed by 1973, insofar as accepting the real situation was concerned. But the church was still far from being able to accept the real situation in positive terms. For one thing, the Cuban church was isolated from the rest of Latin America, and that situation continues. Hence it is also isolated from such things as grassroots church movements and liberation theology. Its exclusivist connection with Rome also prevents it from having direct knowledge of other Latin American churches that are faced with similar situations. It is isolated and alone.

Direct contact between the Cuban bishops and the Holy See was established on March 27, 1974, when Agostino Casaroli visited Cuba. This contact enabled Cesare Zacchi to serve as papal nuncio until the end of 1974, when he was replaced by Mario Tagliaferri as pro-nuncio. However, this link is primarily diplomatic and political, not specifically pastoral and theological.

The church felt very uncertain about accepting socialism and weak in trying to criticize certain one-sided features of the religious issue as embodied in the new Constitution. It realizes that it should first make some contribution to the revolution so that it will have the right to demand corrections. In terms of humility the church has made positive statements. For example, "Jose Dominguez, bishop of Matanzas and president of the episcopal conference, expressed the view that justice would be done to Cuba by lifting economic and political sanctions."<sup>23</sup> The same can be said of the church's condemnation of an attack on a Cuban plane on November 9, 1976.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless the Cuban church has not yet discovered its strategic impor-

tance in the overall destiny of Latin America; nor has it made a firm decision to implement fully the people's church model, though it finds itself in an ideal situation to take the lead in doing so. More than any church in Latin America, it has autonomy vis-à-vis the state and can work in and with the people in civil society, allying itself with them in their revolutionary process. **It** is a difficult task, calling for much moral strength, extreme poverty, and eyes fixed on the future. If the church turns to look back, it will turn into a "pillar of salt."

In *Nicaragua* the earthquake that destroyed Managua also shattered some of the support that Somoza had still been getting from some groups among the bourgeoisie. Somoza robbed the aid funds meant to rebuild the city, took over construction companies, and assumed a personal monopoly over various enterprises that he had once respected as belonging to other members of the national bourgeoisie. Thus his economic and political power reached its peak, but Somoza found himself completely alone and isolated. In February 1973, around the time of the earthquake, the episcopate pointed out that the needed material reconstruction symbolized the need "to construct a new society" that would be more just. On May 27, the episcopate again denounced the violent acts and abuses perpetrated by the authorities against human rights. Bishop Obando y Bravo accompanied the guerrilla group that left for Cuba with thirteen hostages. Gradually the church began to become a target for persecution.

On June 13, 1976, thirteen priests under the leadership of North American Capuchins on the Atlantic coast sent a letter to the Somoza government. In it they denounced acts of detention, torture, and kidnapping committed in Nueva Segovia, Matagalpa, Jinotega, Zelaya, and elsewhere. The only response was the expulsion of Father Avaristo Bertrand as a subversive.

Meanwhile Father Fernando Cardenal was bravely condemning the Somoza government before the United States Senate. Ernesto Cardenal had become plenipotentiary minister for the Front, travelling around the world to inform world opinion about what was happening in Nicaragua. In 1976 Father Miguel d'Escoto, one of "The Twelve," declared that a priest's work "on behalf of justice is a thoroughly Christian and priestly mission. Denunciation of injustice is an inherent part of the proclamation of the gospel message. It entails representing the weak and acting as the voice of those who have no voice, as the documents of the Medellín Conference asserted."

Sandino had fought against the North American invasion of Nicaragua at the end of the twenties. In 1934 he was treacherously assassinated by the recent Somoza's father. The Sandinista movement began anew in the mountains around 1956, and a growing number of students joined in from 1959 on. Carlos Fonseca Amador was one of the first. First it was called the National Liberation Front, then the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). In 1970 members of Catholic University Youth who were working in some of the poorest neighborhoods began to dialogue with the Front. In 1972 many of them joined the Front, including Luis Carrion and Monica Baltodano. Some

of them formed the "proletarian" fraction of the Front in 1975. It concentrated on working with urban people and manual laborers. Another faction, the Ongoing People's War (GPP), one of whose members was Tomás Borge, remained amid the peasantry and in the hillsides.

In November 1977, the National Guard destroyed Ernesto Cardenal's community at Solentiname. Persecution, torture, and assassination increased. The first insurrection took place in 1978. In Esteli alone during that year there were some 2,400 wounded, 2,500 killed, 4,200 orphaned, and 12,000 abandoned. On Christmas 1977, Gaspar García Lavina, a Sacred Heart priest, joined the Sandinista Front. He would soon die a martyr's death and be especially commemorated as a hero of the Revolution.

On January 1, 1978, Bishop Obando y Bravo led a procession in which more than 2,000 people participated. The government responded by assassinating the leader of the bourgeois opposition, the journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal. That moment marked the beginning of the countdown that arrived at zero on July 19, 1979. Somoza found himself alone and isolated in the face of the Sandinista Front, the spontaneous mobilization of the masses, an aroused church, the opposition bourgeoisie, and a United States advocating the Trilateral policy of human rights.

The prolonged strike began. On January 27, the cities stood empty. The whole population was opposed to the regime. Yet the papal nuncio, Gabriel Montalvo, of Colombian nationality, was drinking a toast with Somoza while León was being bombarded. One paper noted: "It is nationally known that the nuncio has publicly identified himself with the Somoza regime" (*Excelsior*; Mexico City, November 4, 1978).

The base-level ecclesial communities participated in the revolution, and the church committed itself to the anti-Somoza war. Victory was finally achieved, and the Sandinista Front entered Managua unconditionally on July 19. The work of national reconstruction and the organization of a new society began. It is over the latter issue, the organization of a postcapitalist society, that Christians of Nicaragua are now divided. The issue is of the greatest importance for the worldwide church. I shall come back to it after I discuss the Puebla Conference.

## **THE PUEBLA CONFERENCE (1979)**

### *Ecclesial Context*

It can be said that the whole Puebla process began in 1973. At the start of the year it was said that "for the moment there would be no third Conference. Observers got this meaning from some statements issued at the beginning of the year here in Rio de Janeiro by the new Secretary General of CELAM."<sup>25</sup> Some bishops were also suggesting that there were both false and true interpretations of the Medellín Conference. One Mexican bishop went so far as to say: "Medellín is more a matter of what people say about it than of what

really happened there. Read carefully, the commitments of Medellín do not oblige the church to side with the poor."<sup>26</sup>

Thus a new ideological platform had to be erected so as to be able to side-step Medellín. In any case CELAM was entrusted with the task of organizing a third conference. It was the start of a long process that would terminate on February 13, 1979. More than two years of preparation enabled people to take cognizance of the importance of Puebla—first, the Latin American church; then, the European church; and then the African and Asian churches.

The whole process can be divided into four stages: (1) from the announcement of the Puebla Conference to the publication of the preliminary consultative document (November 1976 to November 1977); (2) from the consultative document to the publication of the working-draft document in September 1978; (3) from there to the actual start of the Puebla Conference on January 27, 1979; and (4) the Puebla Conference itself from its start to its conclusion on February 13, 1979. The first stage lasted one year; the second, ten months; the third, four months—due to the unforeseen death of Pope Paul VI on August 6, 1978, the sudden death of Pope John Paul I a little more than a month later, and the election of Pope John Paul II. If the third stage had not been delayed and protracted by those unforeseen occurrences, it is quite possible that the Puebla Conference would have turned out differently. For the extended time-period enabled people to learn much more about the upcoming conference and study its details.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the Secretary General of CELAM had formed a plan, was counting on his own experts, and hoped to achieve his aims in satisfactory fashion at the Puebla Conference. In the first stage, however, nothing was clear as yet. There were indications: e.g., the document of the Colombian bishops on "Christian Identity" (November 1976) and the conclusions of a lay people's meeting in Buenos Aires that lasted from July 2 to July 8, 1977. One could see that the theoretical backdrop was the whole idea of the transition from a rural society to an urban, industrial society. Here was the start of Ariadne's thread. The grassroots began to organize and take cognizance, waiting for the preliminary consultative document.

The second stage began in December 1977, when the consultative document appeared with its 1,159 sections. Earlier suspicions were largely confirmed. It contained attacks on the Medellín Conference. Its theoretical framework was developmentalist and even close to that of the Trilateral Commission. It did not speak out clearly to condemn the violations of human rights, multinationals, and National Security regimes. Beginning in January 1978, the most important theological reaction ever to take place in the history of Latin American theology occurred. It was not only theologians who wrote, however. So did bishops, groups of prelates, priests, religious, base-level ecclesial communities, peasants, and natives. It was a spontaneous reaction of dissent. Two brief alternative documents gained recognition. One came from the bishops of Brazil's Northeast, from a team headed by Bishop Marcelo

Pinto Carvalheira; it was entitled: "Aids for Reflection." The other document, from a Venezuelan group, was entitled: "A Piece of Good News: The Church Is Born of the Latin American People."

But another event also took place for the first time in the history of theology. A sizeable group of theologians, pastors, and Christians in Europe, the United States, Africa, and Asia expressed support for the course opened up by the Medellin Conference. They condemned the effort to depart from that tradition. The ground was broken with the famous Memorandum from German theologians (November 1977). Other theologians followed: French, Spanish, Italian, North American (including Chicano bishops), Canadian and, finally, more than seventy theologians from Asia and Africa who met in Colombo, Sri Lanka, shortly before the Puebla Conference itself opened. Puebla took on universal significance because at stake were the interests of church members living on other continents. Puebla would undermine or reinforce positions directly or indirectly affecting Christians all over the world, because in a few short years 50 percent of the world's Catholics would be living in Latin America. In 1975 the number of Christians in America surpassed the number in Europe, and the weight of Catholicism shifted to this side of the Atlantic.

Here is not the place to detail all that took place.<sup>27</sup> The strong reactions against the preliminary consultative document bore fruit. Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider assumed personal responsibility for drawing up the working draft for Puebla, which was the fruit of much consultation. But we must not forget that liberation theologians were excluded from the whole official consultation process and the work of drafting. It was the same as if Rahner, Congar, and all the major theologians of Europe had been excluded from Vatican II.

The death of two popes and the election of John Paul II, the first non-Italian pope in four centuries, delayed the convening of Puebla. People became better aware of the setup of the Puebla Conference, of who was included and who was not. All this enabled people to prepare better for the actual sessions.

Some sought the condemnation of liberation theology and of what they understood by "people's church," "parallel magisterium," "Marxist analysis", and so forth. Others wanted to defend the experiences of the church at the grass roots level and its work with the poor. They wanted to see condemned the violations of human rights, the existence of National Security regimes, the expansion of multinational corporations, etc. Confrontation was inevitable, for there were different options based on differing class interests and ideologies and even specifically national stances. The churches of Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela (a later addition) seemed to have one posture. The Brazilian church and groups of bishops and church members from Peru, Central America, the Caribbean, Ecuador, Chile, and elsewhere upheld the church's committed involvement with the sorely repressed people.

*The Puebla Conference Itself*<sup>28</sup>

Pope John Paul II's arrival in Santo Domingo on January 25, 1979, drew the attention of the world; so the Puebla Conference, which began two days later, could begin its work in an atmosphere of greater tranquillity. The pope's words, in more than forty speeches from the time he left Rome, sparked excited commentaries. The Puebla Conference had to ponder them calmly and take them up in mature fashion. Almost at once liberation theologians made their presence felt. They had not been invited as conference participants, but various bishops had invited them to come to the vicinity of Puebla as advisors. As early as the afternoon of January 28, these theologians responded to a request from the bishops by sending them a theological commentary on the pope's "Opening Address" to the Conference. The ten-page commentary was entitled: "Discurso de Juan Pablo II en la inauguración de la III Conferencia: Breve comentario de un grupo de teólogos."

No support for the New Christendom model was to be found in the essential structure of the pope's discourses. He was not suggesting that the church station itself in political society or make alliances with the dominant classes. Nor was he suggesting that it was to be the state that would help the church to carry out its pastoral function. On the contrary, the pope demanded religious liberty and noninvolvement on the level of political society. Of course the system would manage to find support for its own position in the pope's words. Banks and the Mexican bourgeoisie, among others, were struck and even taken aback by the pope's popular appeal; they quickly interpreted his words as support for the New Christendom model of the church. As the days passed, however, one could see that the pope was not supporting capitalism or condemning socialism. He was upholding the freedom of the church and the transcendence of its mission, whichever system might be in effect. His language and his way of developing a theme did not make for quick, easy comprehension. But if we look at the papal words that made their way into the Puebla Final Document, we can see that they were the ones that were most pastoral in nature, and that spoke most clearly on behalf of an option for the poor.

I am not going to give a day-to-day account of events. I am not going to talk about the makeup of committees, the various drafts of the final document, or the points of high tension. For example, I will not go into details about the letter of Archbishop Lopez Trujillo to Bishop Luciano Duarte, which caused a great sensation because there was no doubt at all about its authenticity. I shall simply offer some reflections on the Puebla Final Document.

Viewing the Final Document, and indeed the whole course of the conference proceedings, we can draw certain conclusions. The various groups that hoped to condemn Christian movements of the common people, grassroots communities, the "people's church," liberation theology, and supporters of a "parallel magisterium" (who they were was never made clear)

were unsuccessful. They were defeated, at least at the Puebla Conference itself. More successful, however, were those who sought to "choke off" the voice of the Latin American church, so that it would not embarrass them with its denunciations. The fact is that little was said at Puebla, and what was said was not very forceful. The Final Document was a "compromise" document, voicing minimal statements on which all could agree. This was very different from Medellin. Many of the documents of Medellin were not too clear, but none of them was weak, timid, inarticulate. Still, those who were expected to be the sure losers at Puebla came out stronger: people's groups, base-level communities, liberation theology, and prophetic bishops. They managed to take control of the adverse situation.

In the end Medellin was adopted as the starting point and inspiration. The Puebla Conference can be placed in the tradition of Medellin. It was not as original and creative as the Medellin Conference, but it was in the same tradition. That in itself is a great deal, and in many quarters it was not expected or hoped for. The door remains open for Christians to keep opting for the interests of the poor and oppressed.

#### **STATUS OF THE "TEXT" AND THE "PUEBLA EVENT"**

I should like to make a few observations on the difference between a mere "text" and an ecclesial "event." All too often we tend to equate an ecclesial "text" with the totality of an ecclesial "event" that encompasses many other aspects and moments. The Puebla "event" is much more than a Puebla "Final Document." If we fail to realize this, then we will be giving the Final Document a centrality that it does not possess; and we will be overlooking where the "event" itself really takes place.

It can be said, in fact, that the "Puebla event" has only begun to take place. Its earliest antecedents go back to early 1973, as I noted above. But its full realization will take place only in the decade of the eighties, and its impact will perdure after that.

The important thing to realize is that the Puebla Final Document is only *one* aspect, and not the chief one, of the whole Puebla "event." So analysis of the "text" of the Final Document can be done in two ways. It might be viewed as the Puebla "event" itself, in which case one would study the document thoroughly in order to implement it, apply it, and critique it. Or, on the other hand, one might view it as simply a part of the historical process involved, a process that has only begun. If we adopt the second alternative, then the contradictions in the Puebla text are not impossible obstacles but enriching incentives. In other words, the text becomes a *quarry* where we can find things we need to shed light on ecclesial praxis centered around the common people. The people's praxis will be the support system of "discernment" and its orthopraxis. It will not be a Machiavellian use of Puebla, or a misdirected interpretation. It will be the people of God's way of discerning and implementing Puebla.

In that case, Puebla will be what the people's church makes of it. When

peasants are imprisoned, when they offer the defense that Puebla inspired their actions, then the oppressors involved will form the conclusion that the Puebla "event" is the root-cause of subversion and popular unrest. That, in fact, is how Medellin became a historic event—not in its seminary walls, but in thousands of grassroots ecclesial communities, in courts and torture chambers, and through its many martyrs. Medellin became real and historically meaningful *in the praxis of the people's church*.

Many factors intervened in the Puebla "text": e.g., consultations, a preliminary consultative document, a working draft, contributions from the Christian people, the words and "gestures" of the pope, and so forth. At the Puebla Conference itself, liberation theologians also played a role, speaking on behalf of the people. All the contradictions in various Latin American countries and among the different classes within the church were evident in the Final Document, where the tensions were not resolved. To some this is a scandal; to others it makes the document a rich quarry.

Since February 1979 the most pressing and immediate task has become one of "discernment." On the basis of the text we must formulate *a discourse that is valid and worthwhile for the praxis of the common people's church*. We must have anthologies of Puebla statements so that the common people can *take possession* of the Puebla "event," which is theirs by right even though Puebla may have originally been organized against them. The *appropriation of Puebla by the common people* is the most immediate task facing us. The matter of the people's appropriation of the text makes clear the difference between Medellin and Puebla. When we consider the originators of Medellin (the CELAM of 1968), many of its texts, and its surrounding atmosphere, we realize that from the very start the conservative groups in the church had handed it over to the more prophetic groups in the church. There was hardly any need for the common people to work at taking possession of Medellin. It was born in the hands of the oppressed.

Puebla was not. It came from hands that had no desire to see Puebla become an event belonging to the Christian common people. Those hands wanted to bury Medellin and condemn many issues that entailed the church's commitment to the poor. But they failed in their attempt. As a quarry, the Puebla text contains precious stones and abundant marble. So we must not make the historical mistake of letting Puebla be taken over by the dominant classes, National Security regimes, or a church unwilling to opt for the poor. It would be a crime to hand over the text to them when the Christian people fought for it in hundreds of meetings, demonstrations, written pieces, and experiences of suffering. The text cannot simply be surrendered without a fight. The common people have a right to the Puebla text, and a duty to flesh it into a historical reality.

### **GENERAL CHALLENGES AFTER PUEBLA**

History has continued its course since February 1979. The victory of the Nicaraguan people has opened a new phase in that history. Christian praxis.

and hence theology, finds itself involved in a set of problems that follows the basic structure of the previous phase but that also underlines certain aspects that I would like to point up here.

### ***The People's Church***

Since Puebla the whole experience of a new model of the church being applied to political and civil society has continued and indeed been reinforced. It is becoming quite clear to people that it is a grassroots ecclesial task. In extremely repressive countries the church is the only place that provides "space" for dialogue, criticism, and political awareness. There the people's church is growing.

The same can be said of Brazil. Its church has grown in stature insofar as it gave a prophetic and people-oriented sense to the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1980, making it part of the fight for human rights against a repressive government. This is also true in Peru, and in Colombia in particular, where the national conference of base-level communities at the start of 1980 gave great impetus to the movement throughout the country. It is also true in Mexico and almost all the countries of Latin America. Certainly it is true in Nicaragua, where such base-level communities have begun to redefine their function within a socialist nation geared toward the common people.

Puebla lent support to this ecclesial experience. Now it is not just prophetic groups but the church as a whole that is supporting the grassroots movement. But clearly the confrontation between two different models of the church goes on, and it is quite possible that the tension will increase.

### ***Confusion in the Face of the "Opening Up"***

Some countries have seen a sudden degree of political "opening up" in their regimes of "controlled democracy." This is true in Brazil, where the control was complete; it is also true in such countries as Peru, where there was greater freedom to begin with.

Whatever the case may be, Christians face an ambiguous situation. It is not a black and white issue, as was the fight for human rights against a repressing state. Now we have a multiplicity of "democratic" possibilities. There is always the possibility that we will end up with populism, capitalist reforms, or various forms of government proposed by Social Democrats or Christian Democrats as the proper political approach for Christians. Populism or third-way alternatives seem to be the greatest temptations facing Christians. Lacking any clear-eyed strategy for implementing a new historical project, people may succumb to capitalist projects entailing greater or lesser dependence on multinational capital. We must keep a close eye on the policies of the Trilateral Commission and conservative progressivism. Although some of their means seem to be modernizing, they tend to install new levels of dependence and exploitation.

It is history that is the great teacher in life, however, and no warnings can

substitute for personal experience. We must keep moving. Sooner or later we may realize more clearly that urgent changes are needed.

*A New Theory and Praxis of Religion*

I have already noted that a prototypical experience for Latin America is now under way in Nicaragua. In its pastoral letter of November 17, 1979, the episcopate had this to say:

We want to start with a word about the achievements of the revolutionary process. They tell us that our people, through years of suffering and social marginalization, have been accumulating the needed experience to convert it all now into a broad-based and profoundly liberative action.

Further on the episcopate said:

Sometimes we hear anxious and fearful talk that the present process in Nicaragua is heading toward socialism. ...Now if socialism means power exercised from the standpoint of the vast majority and increasingly shared by the organized people, so that there will be a real transfer of power to the common classes of the people, then once again it can only find motivation and support in the faith.

This is the most important text coming from an episcopate in many years, perhaps in decades, perhaps in the whole twentieth century. It marks the *positive* entry of the church into the coming society of the future.

In this highly complicated and important situation Christians clearly have a responsibility to resolve the question of religion in an innovative way. We know that in dogmatic Marxism religion is alienation and will disappear with the coming of socialism. By the same token, we also know that conservative Christians are seeking to bring together the church and those groups or classes that oppose the socialist revolution in Nicaragua. All of a sudden, pragmatic factions of the Sandinista vanguard can appreciate the contribution and support of the prophetic and people-rooted Christianity that has been gestating in Latin America over the past twenty years. (Such Christians did not exist in Cuba in 1959, remember.) We are seeing pragmatic Sandinistas (i.e., socialist revolutionaries, which include people who were Christian leaders) join together with Christians who have made a clearcut commitment to the poor, the oppressed classes, and criticism of capitalist society. This union offers sound reasons to be hopeful about the Nicaraguan revolution and an innovative resolution of the religious question.

Going against the views of dogmatic Marxists, those involved must spell out a *theory of religion* advocating *liberation*. Such a theory would explain an existing and growing praxis, showing that this type of religion is a neces-

sary support for every revolution, for the process of reconstruction, and for the future socialist society. In that future society democracy is an ideal to be achieved through criticism and self-criticism; and it is to be people's democracy rather than democratic centralism.

This would be a positive theory of religion based on a theology of work, where religion is situated on its essential level of cult. In the eucharistic cult we offer God a piece of bread, which is the fruit "of the earth and of work." The productive relationship between human beings and nature finds embodiment in the product whose real-life symbol is bread. If that bread has been snatched away from the poor, it cannot be offered as sacrifice. In other words, economic justice between human beings is required before one can offer a sacrifice to God. So we need a *theology of work* within which religion will find its place in the socialist society of the future.

This notion frightens Marxist dogmatists and Christian conservatives. But as far back as 1514, Bartolome de Las Casas read the famous biblical passage that suggested the link between Eucharist and economics. That passage could well serve as the starting point for a new theory of religion in a dialectical, anti-fetishist vein:

If one sacrifices from what has been wrongfully obtained, the offering is blemished; the gifts of the lawless are not acceptable. The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of the ungodly; and he is not propitiated for sins by a multitude of sacrifices. Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor. The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take away a neighbor's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood [Sirach 34:18-22].

In his *History of the Indies* (Book III, Chap. 79), Bartolomé tells us the effect the passage had on him. Closing the text, he freed his Indians and began his fight in their defense. Today, too, the church is summoned to prophesy against the oppression of the poor and to opt for them, as both Medellin and Puebla stated clearly.

## NOTES

1. See my book, *De Medellín a Puebla* (1968-1979) (Mexico City: Edicol, 1979), 620 pp.
2. This is the thesis I proposed in my book, *Hipótesis para una historia de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Barcelona: Estela, 1967). Pablo Richard has recently spelled it out clearly in his thesis, *Mort des Chrétientés et naissance de l'Eglise* (Paris: Centre Lebreton, 1978).
3. *Excelsior*; October 7, 1977, p. 2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, October 8, 1977, p. 3.
6. *ICI*, 388 (1971), p. 17.
7. *Ibid.*, 428 (1973), p. 12.

8. *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), November 15, 1972, p. 9.
9. *Marcha*, 1620 (1972), p. 20.
10. Spanish text in *Uno más uno* (Mexico), December 26, 1977, p. 3.
11. Galet y Ordoñez, *Liberación de la liberación* (Bogota: Paulinas, 1976), p. 38.
12. R. Roncagliolo and F. Reyes Matte, *Iglesia, prensa y militares* (Mexico City: ILET, 1978), p.91.
13. See F. Hinkelammert, *Ideología del sometimiento* (San José, Costa Rica: EDUCA, 1977), p.41f.
14. For the text of this document and background and documentation on the Christians for Socialism movement in Chile see John Eagleson, ed., *Christians and Socialism: The Christians for Socialism Movement in Latin America* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1975).
15. *Signos de lucha y esperanza* (Lima: CEP, 1978), p. 278.
16. Jose Marins et al., eds., *Praxis de los Padres de América Latina* (Bogota: Paulinas, 1978), p.847.
17. *Brasil: ¿Milagro o Engaño?* (Lima: CEP, 1973), p. 110.
18. *Identidad cristiana en la acción por la justicia*, no. 17.
19. *Documentos colectivos del episcopado mexicano* (Mexico City: Paulinas, 1977), pp. 313-69.
20. *Praxis de los Padres*, p. 858.
21. *Excelsior*, March 20, 1979, p. 9.
22. *Praxis de los Padres*, p. 967.
23. *Noticias Aliadas*, November 20, 1975, N43, p. 9.
24. *CELAM Boletín*, 113 (1977), pp. 14-15.
25. *Noticias Aliados*, 26 (1973), p. 2 and p. 9.
26. *Proceso*, Mexico City, 86, June 26, 1978, p. 13.
27. See my work cited in note I.
28. See my article, "Crónica de Puebla," in *Christus*, March-April, 1979. For extensive coverage of the Puebla Conference in English, including the Puebla Final Document, papal talks, and commentaries, see John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, eds., *Pueblo And Beyond* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).