

Other Voices in the Mexican Catholic Church

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TRENDS IN MEXICO'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church is no uniform monolith. Its view of itself and understanding of its mission and presence in history varies from one time, country or region to another. This article takes a look at one of the faces of the manifold complex that is the Mexican Catholic Church. To do that, we need to establish minimum criteria.

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Juan Bautista Libanio says that the model of “Catholic identity” —that is, institutional doctrine, practice and structures with a firm, coherent, stable legal basis— appeared in the sixteenth century with the Council of Trent and remained almost unquestioned and without significant fissures until Vatican Council II (1963-1965). After that date, the ecclesiastic zeitgeist can be explained by the attempts at restoration or destruction of that identity, by the different reactions it has caused and, consequently, by the different pastoral projects that have grown out of it. In this context, Libanio distinguish-

es four tendencies in the post-Council church:

- a) The **postmodern position** considers the current situation irreversible and favors the disappearance of a common identity, leaving the task of perpetuating the message of Christ to the free will and spontaneous choice of small groups.
- b) The **conservative position** does not recognize the irreversibility of the collapse of the identity inherited from the Council of Trent and diligently attempts to maintain and rebuild it.
- c) The **moderate, neo-fundamentalist tendency** proposes creating an

identity that would be the true codification of Vatican II. This tendency is based on two suppositions: the irreversibility of the dissolution of the identity established by the Council of Trent and the need for a clear common identity for all. Their strategy is to proceed with the reforms of Vatican II in the fashion of the Council of Trent; that is, to develop a compact, simple message and resort to ecclesiastical authority as the main unifying factor.

- d) The **tendency of pluralism and commitment** strives for a more dia-

Because the other voices in Mexico's Catholic Church are a minority and because they receive scant if any media coverage, I think it is useful to present some of the characteristics of this other face, the critical "other" within the church that falls into the category of Libanio's pluralist-commitment tendency.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

In 1971, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez published his *Teología de la*

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lectual, historical and dynamic Catholic identity that would be built through commitment and pluralism in today's Latin America, in the spirit of the Latin American Bishops Conferences of Medellín, Colombia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico (1979).¹

In general, the Mexican Catholic Church continues to be vertical, centralized, hierarchical and conservative. With the exception of a minimal opening between 1969 and 1971, motivated by the cruel events of October 1968,² Mexico's Catholic hierarchy has been a faithful follower of the Vatican line. This can be explained by relations between church and state in the last two centuries in Mexico.

Liberación (Liberation Theology) in which he summarized the tendencies and orientations derived from the second and third Latin American Bishops' Conferences (CELAM). They originated in documents that came out of the Vatican Council II, such as *Lumen Gentium* and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, which redefine the church as the "people of God" and promote the active participation of lay people in the world. The Latin America bishops effected their own reading of Vatican II from the point of view of the Latin American situation, leading to the second Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellín, Colombia in 1968.

Liberation theology interprets Christian faith from the point of view of the

experience of the poor. It attempts to help them see their own faith in a new light so that the reading of the Scriptures will give them the sustenance for affirming their dignity and worth, as well as their right to fight together for a better life. Poverty is considered the product of a social structure, and therefore this theology is critical of that structure which makes it possible for a few to have so much while millions and millions live in destitution. Liberation theologians have criticized those ideologies that justify this inequality, including the use of religious symbols.

Berryman describes this theology starting from three points: the interpretation of Christian faith through suffering, the struggle and the hope of the poor; a critique of society and the ideologies that support it; and a critique of Church activity and that of Christians from the point of view of the poor. At the same time it is a new interpretation of the meaning of Christianity and the recovery of a prophetic tradition found in the Bible.³

ECCLESIASTIC BASE COMMUNITIES

One of the main movements inspired in this conception of faith and of the church is that of the ecclesiastic base communities (CEB), which arose inside the Catholic Church in the late 1960s in the turbulent context of that time: stagnation and crisis of national economies, emergence and consolidation of authoritarian and military regimes, particularly in the Southern Cone of the Americas, and the emergence of new social theories like dependency theory. The CEBs' novelty consisted in their ability to mobilize and their redefini-

tion of religious faith from the perspective of poor people when surrounded by an ethos that for decades had sought to reproduce and maintain the established order.

The CEBs define themselves as communities because of their lifestyle. Usually, each CEB is made up of 10 to 15 people who meet once or twice a week to discuss their problems and solve them according to the Gospel. Each has a coordinator whose function is to preside over celebrations, moderate group member participation and foster discussion. Their conception of religion is not divorced from the transformation of the world and for that, they use a methodology known as “see-judge-act”: “see” the people’s situation and identify both social and ecclesiastic projects and practices; “judge” and think about the kind of society the members want in both socio-political and Biblical-theological terms; and, finally, “act,” that is, implement strategies for organized action in the construction of a more just order of things.⁴

Mexico’s first CEB appeared in 1967 in Cuernavaca with Fathers Rolland and Genoel, and the Movement for a Better World (MUMM), led by Father Orozco, promoted them. In 1968, the MUMM coordinated different meetings to turn the parish into a true Christian community. The following year saw the first national meeting of CEBs. Many of these communities were born linked to the Biblical movement and other kinds of groups that did not have the same orientation as the CEBs. At the end of 1969, a first national meeting of Mexican theologians was held where participants promoted the need to create new secular movements like the CEBs. In the first stage,⁵ the analysis the CEBs had of the situation was often naive

and idealistic; sometimes, they were a mere inventory of proposals. They did not integrate fully into the popular movement and action was centered mainly on thinking about council documents and on courses and workshops about the lay people’s apostolate, the church as missionary and the situation of the church in today’s world.

In 1973 the working method changed to using the needs of the grassroots community as its starting point, beginning a liberating Biblical reflection and affirming that faith should lead to a critique of social reality. The groups were

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better organized and the communities began to grow, particularly in those dioceses in which they had support from the bishops. CEB members studied the relationship of faith to political commitment, critically read the Mexican bishops’ letter called *El cristiano ante las opciones sociales y políticas* (The Social and Political Options Facing Christians) and discussed attitudes contrary to the Gospel in society and politics. From the methodological point of view, they advanced somewhat by discovering that their methods for analyzing the world had to be consistent with the kind of society they aspired to. In those years, new analytical methodologies were developed and communication with a community, educational and popular perspective was strongly promoted.

In January 1979, in the framework of CELAM III in Puebla, attended by Pope John Paul II on his first visit to Mexico, the CEBs analyzed the road they had travelled since 1968 and took advantage of the opportunity to meet and dialogue with theologians and bishops from other parts of the hemisphere. The *Document of Puebla* that came out of the meeting took on board and followed the general orientation of what had been said in Medellín, confirming the CEBs in their work. A year later, in March 1980, some members of the Mexican communities participated in

the hemisphere-wide meeting of CEBs in Redonda, Brazil.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE CEBs

CEBs are not evenly distributed in all of Mexico. The states with the largest number of these groups have dioceses whose pastoral activity is different from most, dioceses, with a critical perspective, more open to social issues. It was in Morelos that they appeared first, with the complete support of Monseigneur Sergio Méndez Arceo (1907-1992), one of the most important figures in the current called “the Church of the poor.” For 20 of the 30 years of his bishopric, from 1963 to 1983, he acted with a li-

beration theology perspective. In 1983, when he retired because of age, he founded the Óscar Arnulfo Romero Solidarity Committee to continue his work with the peoples of Central America, an outstanding feature of his years as bishop. With his death in 1992, liberation theology lost one of its main defenders and an individual with an extremely high international public profile.

Other areas of the country with a high concentration of communities is Veracruz, particularly the region called La Huasteca, the industrial area of La Laguna (Torreón, Coahuila and Gómez

García, bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, stand out. Both Lona and Ruiz labored in the framework of pastoral activity open to political, economic and social dimensions, and their lives were often threatened or directly endangered, as were those of the people who worked with them.

Don Samuel Ruiz came into national and international public view with the January 1994 events of the Chiapas Highlands, but his work dates back to 1960 when he was named bishop of the San Cristóbal diocese. Two years after his arrival, he initiated an ambi-

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Palacio, Durango) and Chihuahua, particularly the Tarahumara Mountains, because of encouragement from its bishop, Monseigneur Llaguno, who particularly fostered pastoral activity among the indigenous people there. I should also mention Monseigneur Talamás, bishop of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and Monseigneur Robalo, former bishop of Zacatecas, as some of the few who supported liberation theology and the CEBs. The dioceses of the southern Pacific area (Oaxaca and Chiapas) deserve special mention: for some years they were the site of important church activity, growing participation with an orientation to social commitment and non-traditional positions. Here, figures like the bishop of Tehuantepec, Monseigneur Arturo Lona, and Samuel Ruiz

tious program to train indigenous people as catechists. He started schools and ensured that his was one of the first dioceses to ordain indigenous deacons. In 1974 he organized the Indigenous Congress, attended by 2,000 indigenous delegates representing the just under 400,000 indigenous people living in the state of Chiapas. In general, his work is widely recognized.

In 1993, papal nuncio Girolamo Prigione organized a campaign to promote Samuel Ruiz's removal arguing, among other things, "deviations in doctrine." In the midst of that campaign came the Zapatista uprising of January 1994, after which Ruiz became an important mediator between the indigenous and the federal government. This did not stop the ecclesiastic dispute, but it did

clearly show up Prigione's intentions. Years later, amidst a shower of negative opinions, Prigione was removed by the Holy See. In accordance with canonical law, Samuel Ruiz resigned his diocese when he turned 75 in 1999.

In the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the regimes of so-called "real socialism" many groups went into crisis, particularly after Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff left the priesthood.⁶ These events shattered and dispersed the communities in Mexico, but they did not disappear completely. In 1992, at their fourteenth national meeting, the communities estimated that there were 10,000 CEBs nationwide, located in 40 of the country's dioceses.

THE EMERGENCE OF NGOS

At the end of the 1980s, nongovernmental organizations began to multiply nationwide and became an alternative space for creative participation for many Christians who wanted to experience their faith as part of a more active commitment to the oppressed groups of society.

Many civic human rights organizations have been created because of a concern about justice and the justice system in Mexico. The decline in living standards has meant that the fight for justice has been taken up by civic associations committed to the defense of human rights like equality before the law, security, individual liberties, freedom of association, etc. Several dioceses throughout the country—particularly in the more conflict-ridden regions—have human rights centers. This is the case of the dioceses of Tehuantepec and San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Some parishes, like San Pedro Mártir in the outskirts of Mexico City, have a high level of participation and their own human rights center. Others are not located directly in parishes or dioceses but do belong to religious congregations from where they carry out defense and promotion of these rights. This is the case of the Jesuit Miguel Agustín Pro Center and the Dominican Fray Domingo Vitoria Center, both in Mexico City.

In the 1990s, the most visible CEB participation was in solidarity movements and activities at different specific political moments like during the Xi'Nich March⁷ and the "Exodus for Democracy."⁸ These were moments and spaces in which Christians, CEB members committed to grassroots causes, together with other groups, have demanded justice in matters of human rights and democracy.

SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Liberation theology and the CEBs have been minority and marginal but very vibrant movements. Some priests, religious and lay persons have given their lives or been subject to harassment and violation of their basic rights as they have supported grassroots struggles, as is the case of Bishop Samuel Ruiz.⁹

The last Latin American Bishops Conference held in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in 1992, was the scene of a battle to maintain the spirit of the decisions of Medellín and Puebla. It was not an easy battle, since large sectors of the church distrust liberation theology's doctrinal proposals. The new balance of forces—with the presence of more conservative sectors—made for a more centralist orga-

nization of the conference than formerly, making it difficult for the bishops to present a position that more faithfully represented their own. The Santo Domingo document reaffirmed the preferential option for the poor, but not with the vigor of previous documents: there are fewer allusions to social issues than in the Medellín and Puebla documents, and the language to deal with the ones that are mentioned has been modified.

The CEBs do not act together as a compact movement. Rather, they are linked to communities or networks that agree on certain values contained in the spirit that founded them.

We can conclude that liberation theology and the CEBs in Mexico are not as visible as they were in the 1970s; although their participation, such as in the cases of the Xi'Nich March and the "Exodus for Democracy," has been picked up by the media, in general they receive less and less coverage in both secular and religious media. Nevertheless, some events show how the preferential option for the poor—which implies a more horizontal, collegiate vision of ecclesiastical relations—continues to be alive and well among some groups. In the last few years—side-stepping the old social-analytical categories—religious congregations and other groups have founded many civic organizations from which people are trying to struggle for the creation of a less unjust world. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Juan Bautista Libanio, *La vuelta a la gran disciplina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paulinas, 1986) as quoted in José de Jesús Legorreta, comp., *La Iglesia católica y la política en el*

México de hoy (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2000), pp. 134-135.

² Miguel Concha Malo et al., *La participación de los cristianos en el proceso de liberación popular* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1986), pp. 91-96.

³ Phillip Berryman, *Teología de la Liberación* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1989), p. 11.

⁴ Comisión de Análisis de la Biblia y Teología de las CEB, *CEB y compromiso político* (Mexico City: n. p., 1988), pp. 8-12.

⁵ See Miguel Concha Malo et al., op. cit., pp. 225-247.

⁶ In 1985, Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff published *Iglesia: carisma y poder* (Church: Charisma and Power) (Salamanca, España: Editorial Sígueme), in which he questioned matters such as the infallibility of the pope. Boff was ordered to abstain from writing or giving lectures for a year and, in exemplary fashion—surprising even church authorities—he obeyed the order. Church authorities lifted the prohibition before the year was up, but the relationship continued to be tense until Boff finally left the priesthood in 1992.

⁷ The 1994 Xi'Nich March began in Palenque, Chiapas, and culminated at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Basilica in Mexico City. Indigenous people and their organizations from Chiapas demanded the freedom of unjustly jailed prisoners, the implementation of promised public works projects and the return to the communities of money that had been "lost" by local mayors. After the march, the Xi'Nich Organization was formed. This group was decorated by the French government in December 1999 for its human rights defense work and its support for other sectors of the Chiapas social movement.

⁸ In March 1999, an estimated 15,000 Party of the Democratic Revolution activists began the "Exodus for Democracy," a march from the Gulf state of Tabasco to Mexico City to demand honest elections and the investigation of the murder of Aurelio Peñalosa by the Federal Electoral Tribunal and then-President Ernesto Zedillo.

⁹ For a more detailed description, see Miguel Concha Malo, op. cit., p. 158 onward.