

CELAM V in Global Context: An Asian Reading

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Latin America is, in a sense, the birthplace of what we today call “contextual theology.” Before Asian theology (and others) has come to acquire a wide recognition, discussions on “contextual theology” were indeed largely dominated by those on liberation theology (or *theologies*, to be more precise), i.e., a contextual theology took shape in Latin America.

Liberation theology has had a myriad of eminent scholars and inspiring leaders as its voice; yet another powerful and institutional driving force has been the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM). Its whereabouts have naturally come to attention of those interested in contextual theology, not only in Latin America, but elsewhere. Here I would like to discuss the context of its fifth general conference recently held in Aparecida, Brazil.

The Footsteps of CELAM

Although roughly a functional equivalent of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), CELAM has a longer and bumpier history compared to its Asian counterpart. As Camilo Maccise has briefly noted in the following article, CELAM’s inception goes back to 1955, prior to the Second Vatican Council (This is why some even argue that CELAM has influenced Vatican II, although what is normally suggested is the other way round). What is considered truly “revolutionary” of CELAM is the dramatic unfolding of the second general conference at Medellín, Colombia in 1968. At this conference, the church leadership of the region has clearly took the side of the poor, courageously recognized and criticized the economic and political oppressions, and explicitly upheld major tenets of liberation theology. Medellín conference thus has marked a watershed for the history of Latin American Catholicism, providing also a point of reference for the Church in the coming years of military dictatorships. Naturally, the groundbreaking conference at the same time alarmed the establishment both in the Church and society.² Whether well-founded or not, the fear felt by those in the position of power was that inspirations of this “people’s theology” were actually emanating from behind the Iron Curtain.

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² Vatican’s concern over liberation theology is illustrated, in passing, in Edmund Chia’s article in this issue.

Since Medellín, therefore, CELAM has become a locus of spectacular power struggle between—to put it rather simplistically—pros and cons of liberation theology. Particularly, heavy hands of the Vatican and CELAM's leadership were felt during subsequent general conferences in Puebla, Mexico (1978) and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (1992), including their preparation process. The general scholarly consensus seems to be that, in Puebla, despite fierce oppositions of conservative bishops, the line of Medellín was kept and reaffirmed (even coining the phrase “preferential option for the poor”), while in Santo Domingo, the tradition was not followed, if not entirely ignored, to the dismay of many proponents and supporters of liberation theology. It should also be noted that in the interval of these two conferences come two major documents from the Vatican on liberation theology, widely considered its official disapproval.³

The fifth general conference at Aparecida, Brazil stands in such a historical trajectory.

Aparecida: A New Beginning

Predictably, one of the main concerns of the observers was whether Aparecida would replicate Santo Domingo, or would revive the radical tone of previous conferences.

Yet, here lies the danger of overlooking a new context and possibilities of the fifth general conference. Whether liberation theology is still alive or not—this is a legitimate and even necessary question; but if we continue seeing CELAM only in terms of power struggles over liberation theology, we may be missing some important signs of the time.

Here, I would like to leave the evaluation of Aparecida conference (especially its final document) to the three authors from Latin America, and focus on the context of the event.

It should be noted, first of all, that there was a strong desire on the part of the Latin American episcopate gathered in Aparecida to avoid open conflicts and seek harmonious and constructive cooperation (among themselves and with Rome). Many felt that the “animosities” (Luiz Demétrio Valentini) and “ecclesial disorientation” (Jon Sobrino) of Santo Domingo must not be repeated, if the Latin American Church is to respond, truly and effectively, to the social and ecclesial crises. The commanding will of the conference was thus to go one step forward beyond the futile state of war.

Secondly, it has to be noted as well that, while there seemed to be still

³ See, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”* (Vatican City: Libreria Edrice Vaticana, 1984); and idem, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (Vatican City: Libreria Edrice Vaticana, 1986). It should be noted that the latter document is more positive in tone and carefully appreciative of “liberative” aspects of the gospel, which led some to consider it as a “Vatican’s version” of liberation theology.

tensions and pains over liberation theology at the conference, the social context and impact of such strife have significantly changed. Charges against liberation theology of being an ally of Marxism (and fears that a commitment to this theology eventually leads to the rise of Soviet satellites in Latin America) make little sense today, after USSR itself is gone (and China has surrendered to the global capitalism). Not only that ecclesial authorities are freed from the shadow of Soviet empire, but also that what they have to say about the present all-capitalist world—which is too often profit-driven—has much resonance with liberation theology. In a way, therefore, the time is ripe for the Vatican and liberation theology to fight together for the common cause, especially in social issues (if not in ecclesial matters).

If the question—whether liberation theology is still alive or not—is to be answered, we must say that, to the surprise of many Western observers, it has proven to be still very much alive, at least on this continent. Yet, that is not the end of the discussion. The same theology today finds itself in a new and different context. It is pertinent, in this regard, that a Brazilian bishop, Luiz Demétrio Valentini, in his essay “Aparecida: Texto e Contexto,”⁴ characterized the fifth general conference as a “starting point” (*ponto de partida*) rather than “arrival point.”

A World beyond Capitalism?

Furthermore, Aparecida can also be considered, in an even wider scope, symptomatic of current global situation. Two observations are in order.

First, the emerging trend of convergence between “pros” and “cons” of liberation theology, which is in itself a potentially positive development, may in turn be a reflection of the current difficult political environment worldwide. The fall of Soviet bloc has put an end to the bipolar politics around the world. The rhetoric of “revolution” has worn out as its most powerful embodiment—which used to command the “half” of the world—has disappeared. Many, if not all, political parties in the democratic societies had to reposition themselves as “moderate” and “center” (such as center-left/center-right) so as to suggest that they no longer opt for a radical change. Thus, any attempt to overthrow a present global political/economic order, even for a good cause, has come to be considered either too romantic or too barbarian. Before the seduction and advancement of global capitalism, which promises success and prosperity, a radical social transformation (which in practice was often socialist-inspired) now appears to be an unrealistic option.

In such a climate, social reform can be envisioned only as a revision of the existing world order, rather than its total replacement. This might be a progress in a sense, since it implicitly renounces violence as a pathway to social

⁴ See his blog essay at: www.diocesedejales.org.br/palavradobispo/palavradobispo_detalhes.asp?id=673

reform (even though “revolution” need not be violent) and avoids any illusory utopianism; yet on the other hand, the absence of alternative social system makes it harder to radically challenge or even question the world system that is currently reigning. Whether one likes it or not, it is deemed, there is no exit from the all-capitalist world.⁵

The Reign of God is never a political project, as critics of liberation theology are fond of arguing. Yet, if one is really to feed the hungry and dress the naked, social implications of the gospel is unavoidable. If such a living out of the gospel is somehow impeded, one has to find out the reasons, and respond to them. Indeed, the issue of poverty cannot be simply dealt with by the mercy and good will of individual Christians, but requires a collective and systematic analysis and response.

Thus, the dispute over liberation theology is taking on a new significance in the changing global context. It is no longer about how to resist the Marxist version of “salvation” in pursuit of social justice, but is about how to fight the seduction and invasion of capitalism in the every corner of the globe. If the possible rapprochement between Vatican and liberation theology cannot help people to envision a new world beyond the unchallenged rule of capitalism—as the World Social Forum symbolized by another Brazilian city Porto Alegre has been striving—Aparecida will not be able to become a source of hope for people in the midst of escalating calamities.

The Globalization of Issues

Secondly, when globalization of capitalism is discussed, we must also address globalization of issues. Now with the effect of globalization (i.e., the increasing mobility of commodities, information and people, and their lessening tie with a particular location) omnipresent, problems in one place of the globe are becoming issues elsewhere. This is true to the local churches as well.

Poverty, for example, is absolutely not a unique problem of Latin America (This is not to say, however, the issue in the region is less important or less urgent). In fact, CELAM has never regarded it as an internal problem of the region, but always considered it as a global (or at least inter-regional) matter. The problem is indeed increasingly global in character and is ever aggravating, as the local economy bifurcates between the rich and the poor by the influx of global capitals to the region, which has, for better or for worse, pushed it (especially Brazil) up to a major player in the world market economy.

Latin America is no longer a “Third world,” as the First world is appearing in the midst of the Third (and the Third in the First) in the age of globalization. Capitalism is creating a whole class of people everywhere in the world, who actively participate and benefit from the emerging universal order. They

⁵ A harsh criticism of “centrist” or the “third-way” politics is found, for example, in Chantal Mouff, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

belong to a relatively uniform, “cosmopolitan,” and strongly secularist culture regardless of their location, and powerfully mobilizing this world. How the church should relate itself to such winners of capitalism and their culture? In addition to (and in relation to) the grave issue of poverty, this is a question not only for CELAM, but also for the rest of the Church universal, including the church in Asia. Although significant particularities and differences must be borne in mind, answers need to be supported by an understanding of global reality, and will carry a common global relevance.

Likewise, considering the flourishing of Pentecostal/Evangelical Christian communities and other religions worldwide, and resurgence of traditional/indigenous identities after the clearly divided world of the Cold War, it is natural that ecumenism and interreligious dialogue have (finally) appeared on the horizon of the discussion at Aparecida.

While it cannot be overemphasized that there are significant differences depending on regional context, strong commonalities can also be noted between the reality which Aparecida addresses and that which FABC has been striving to respond to, by way of triple dialogue, i.e., the dialogue with the poor, cultures and other religions. In this sense, a concrete and common ground is emerging, not only between Rome and the church in Latin America, but also among all local churches.

Thus, put in such a global and changing context, Aparecida marks the beginning of a new chapter for the church in Latin America and the church universal—whatever is meant by “great continental mission” in concrete and in practice.