

# The Conference of Aparecida: Assessment and Perspectives

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The Fifth General Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, which took place from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2007 in the city of Aparecida in Brazil, has just come to its end. The daily news reports concerning this important ecclesial event were very scarce. When there were, they focused on Pope Benedict XVI's journey to that country for the inauguration of the Assembly and other pastoral activities. Once the Pope returned to Rome, the Bishops' Conference found no space in the news media. However, from the vantage point of the Catholic Church, this episcopal reunion holds great value and importance for both the present and the future of the continent, since from it will come forth pastoral commitments.

## 1. The Pastoral Itinerary of the Four Previous Conferences

As its number indicates, this Conference was preceded by other four. The first was the one held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1955, which pointed out three outstanding issues to be tackled with: the lack of clergy, the need of adequate religious instructions for the people, and the urgency of promoting an authentic and evangelical social commitment. The second Conference was that of Medellin, Colombia in 1968. Its main theme was *The Church in the Actual Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*. Medellin brought forth a new image of the Church who wishes to be poor, missionary, paschal and at the service of the Kingdom. It is a church of Basic Christian Communities, of lay pastoral agents committed to the people, of a religious life immersed in poor environments, with a new theological reflection in search of the historical and liberating dimension of salvation and a spirituality that unites faith with justice.

The third Conference was held in Puebla, Mexico in 1979 and was a serene confirmation of Medellin. In it prevailed the liberating line of the preferential option for the poor. The Basic Christian Communities were also reinforced, and the social dimension of love was underlined. The fourth Conference was that of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic in 1992. It took place on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first evangelization of America. Its central theme was *New Evangelization, Human Promotion and Christian Culture*. The three principal lines assumed as commitment in Santo Domingo

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were: an evangelization new in its ardour, method and expression, an integral human promotion of the Latin American and Caribbean people and an evangelization held in accordance with their particular culture.

## 2. The Fifth General Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops

The theme chosen for this assembly was: *Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ in order that Our People may have Life in Him. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn: 14, 6)*. In the last 15 years, the Latin American and ecclesial panorama has changed. Governments have become democratic but corruption in and the loss of credibility of the political class have grown. Economic neoliberalism has caused greater poverty and unemployment which has led to emigration, marginalization, crimes, drug trafficking and violence. The Catholic Church has lost many of its members who left for other Christian denominations or other religions.

### 2.1 The First Steps

In order to prepare the Assembly, the *Document of Participation* was drawn up. It became the object of many criticisms. It seemed indeed strange that once again, as had happened in Santo Domingo (1992), the traditional *method* of CELAM's work : *see, judge and act* was going to be abandoned.

The *Document of Participation* was re-written in accordance with 2400 pages of remarks and suggestions, and became the *Document of Synthesis*, which was improved in many aspects.

### 2.2 The Celebration of the Conference

Pope Benedict XVI's speech on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May marked the beginning of the work of CELAM V. The Conference consisted of two stages. The first encompassed organization and interventions: work commissions were established; the expectations of each country's episcopal conference were expressed through their presidents.

The second stage was dedicated to the drafting of the document. There were four drafts. The last one was approved with 127 votes for and 2 against. Certainly the text approved by the Conference of Aparecida still has to be reviewed by the Vatican before being promulgated. Our reflections are based on this final approved draft and also on the official summary made by CELAM.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.3 Structure of the Text

The document begins with an introduction which states that the text is the fruit of a dialogue intended to renew the Church's action in creative continuity with the previous CELAM conferences. The text has three parts that employ

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<sup>2</sup> [Editor's Note: The final document of CELAM V was approved by Pope Benedict XVI on June 29, 2007, with some modifications in the text. This article was written prior to the papal approval.]

the theological and pastoral method of *see, judge, and act*.

(1) The First Part: The Life of Our People

The first chapter looks at the believer in Christ and renders thanksgiving to God for all the gifts received, specially the grace of faith that makes him a follower of Jesus and the joy of participating in the ecclesial mission.

The second chapter, *the missionary disciple's survey of reality*, from a theological and pastoral perspective, focuses on the enormous changes that are taking place on our continent and in the world which call for a new evangelization. Different realities are described at socio-cultural, economic, socio-political, ethnical and ecological levels. Immense challenges such as globalization, structural injustice, crisis in the transmission of faith and others are also noted. Among the positive aspects of these changes, the fundamental value of human person is underscored. From the *economic* point of view, it is pointed out that globalization follows a dynamics of concentration of power and wealth in the hands of few who have material and financial resources, above all the control of information. In the socio-political dimension, the reinforcement of democratic structures in many countries is noted as a positive fact. With such structures, indigenous people, afro-americans and women have increased social participation. On the negative side, the growth of corruption within both society and governments, the escalation of violence and the approval of unjust laws are pointed out. In the field of ecology, it is observed that the urge for economic profit has overridden decisions necessary for protecting the diversity and richness of nature.

The difficult and complex situation of the Catholic Church is presented. In spite of its deficiencies and ambiguities, the Church has continued to witness and proclaim Christ and his Gospel. One can evidently perceive the biblical animation within pastoral work and the liturgical renewal which gives a stronger accent to the celebrative and joyful dimension of the Christian faith. The total self-commitment of many missionaries as well as the growth of the pastoral efforts of renewal and social work can be clearly observed. Among the shadows of reality within the Catholic Church of Latin America are the decrease of its members who left for other confessions or sects, a certain clericalism and some tendency to turn back towards a pre-Vatican II ecclesiology and spirituality; the discrimination of women and their absence within pastoral structures; the lack of self criticism, of an authentic obedience and of the evangelical exercise of authority; and a legalism which weakens the centrality of Jesus Christ. In evangelization and general pastoral work, the language used is deemed having little relevance to today's culture, specially young people. It is also noted that the number of priests is still insufficient and not distributed equitably.

## (2) The Second Part: The Life of Jesus Christ in the Missionary Disciples

The second part begins with a brief overview of the Latin America and the Caribbean reality today. In the third chapter, the *joy of being summoned to proclaim the Gospel*, describes the “good news” with all its dimensions: the good news of human dignity, of life, of the family, of human activity and of the universal destiny of all creation.

The fourth chapter deals with the *vocation to holiness* that we are all called to as followers of Jesus, through being transformed into Him by the Holy Spirit.

The fifth chapter focuses on the *communion of all the people of God and of all within the people of God*, considering, from a disciple’s and missionary perspective, the different members of the Church with their specific vocations; as well as on ecumenical dialogue, relation with Judaism and interreligious dialogue. We find mentioned as *places* for communion the diocese, the parish (as a community of communities), the Basic Christian Communities and other small communities, the episcopal conferences; and as specific vocations, bishops, priests, permanent deacons, laity and consecrated persons.

The sixth chapter traces an *itinerary for the missionary disciples* which considers a Trinitarian, Christocentric and Marian spirituality the spiritual richness of popular Catholic piety. There are different *formation stages* with their own criteria and loci, catering to the different needs of the Christian faithful, among which special attention is given to Christian initiation and continuing catechetical and pastoral formation.

## (3) The Third Part: The Life of Jesus Christ for our People

The third part enters fully into the actual mission of the Latin American and Caribbean Church. Described here are the missionary dynamism and the main pastoral *activities*. The seventh chapter underlines the *mission of the disciples at the service of the plenitude of life* that Christ brought to us. The need for a *continental mission* is pointed out, for which the dioceses and the Episcopal conferences will be in charge.

In the eighth chapter, *the Kingdom of God and the promotion of human dignity*, the preferential option for the poor and the excluded is affirmed. The true faces of the poor are recognized; justice and globalization of solidarity are promoted.

Titled “*Family, Persons and Life*”, the ninth chapter promotes a culture of love within marriage and the family; a culture of respect for life in society, and the care of the environment.

The tenth chapter, *Our people and culture*, focuses on the pastoral challenges of today’s world. Education and communication with an end to witness and proclamation of the Good News of Christ are discussed. New fields and centers of decision are mentioned: pastoral work in the big cities, the presence of Christians in public life, specially the political commitment of lay

people; solidarity with indigenous and afro-american people, and evangelizing activities which demand reconciliation, fraternity and communion in the Church and in society.

The document concludes with a prayer asking the Lord, through Mary, to help the Latin American and Caribbean Church and people.

#### **2.4 A Document Complex and Rich in Perspectives**

As it usually happens with official documents, fruits of dialogue and discernment between different and even opposite mentalities, the Document of Aparecida is one of compromise. Different approaches to the reality, diverse theological and pastoral perspectives are present in it. An important fact is that in Aparecida, participants had the possibility of discussing with freedom under a good spirit of communion. Besides realities and controversial themes, the use of the method *see, judge and act*, the preferential option for the poor, the Basic Christian Communities, the concept of social sin and the social dimension of love have been reaffirmed and incorporated into the teachings of CELAM.

What is more fundamental and important than the document itself is that the Church of Latin America and the Caribbean in Aparecida has come to grips with its identity and mission, and has sought to renew itself in dialogue in the light of faith with the great challenges of the present epoch. We are invited to look to the future, where the Spirit continues to send forth the followers of Christ to witness and to proclaim the Good News of the Lord.