

# What Was at Stake in Aparecida?

*José María Arnaiz, SM<sup>1</sup>*

We can well say that what was at stake in Aparecida was the celebration of an authentic paschal experience and the re-living of those early kerygmatic moments in the primitive church. It was a return to the proclamation of Christ dead and risen, the proclamation that leads to conversion. Poetically speaking, it was about transforming cries into songs and signs of death into signs of life. For if faith does not transform us, our life dies. A living faith is incarnated in values and leads to conversion. To this end, missionary disciples have to dedicate themselves. The initial evangelization has not often taken place.<sup>2</sup> At stake was to return to Jesus Christ, our center. To do this, we need more Gospel and less doctrine, more Jesus Christ and less law, more Kingdom and less Church. The fundamental task is to share the history of God's love that has been given to us in Jesus Christ. For this, we need a personal encounter with Him.

- For the Pope, at stake was a balance between humane, harmonious and sustainable development in solidarity and Christian faith. *“Faith in God has animated the life and the culture of these nations for more than five centuries... At present, this same faith has some serious challenges to address because the harmonious development of society and the Catholic identity of these people are in jeopardy.”*<sup>3</sup>
- For the Brazilians, at stake was a “new way” of being church. They were calling for a renewal and restructuring of the ecclesiastic institution, which would consist of building communities of humane size within the structures of

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in Our Time* Catechesi Tradendae (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1978), 19. It reads: “The specific character of catechesis, as distinct from the initial conversion...has the twofold objective of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ ...But in catechetical practice, this model order must allow for the fact that the initial evangelization has often not taken place. A certain number of children baptized in infancy come for catechesis in the parish without receiving any other initiation into the faith and still without any explicit personal attachment to Jesus Christ...there are other children who have not been baptized and whose parents agree only at a later date to religious education...This means that ‘catechesis’ must often concern itself not only with nourishing and teaching the faith, but also with arousing it unceasingly...on the part of those who are still on the threshold of faith.”

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily at the Inauguration Mass of CELAM V (<http://en.celam.info/content/view/161/25/>).

the parish, diocese and universal church. This would constitute the institutional renovation. At stake would be a new way of being church which would support new forms of activity. Those who drafted the Document of Aparecida are asking for changes in the structure and organization of the church, feeling that expressions of authoritarianism are antagonistic to the Spirit of the Gospel.

- *At stake was a response to the changes of our times.* It was noted during the meetings that we are living on this continent during a crucial turn in our history. We are like Jonah in the belly of the whale, moving from a situation already past into a new one that is not yet defined. We are people walking on air above an abyss. We are the evocators of the possible and the creators of the context in which the possible can come into being. We seek to evangelize the matrices, the wombs where the human takes shape and is nourished. This is to evangelize in a new way, but still a way based on the good that conquers evil. In the midst of the conflicts in which we live, it is not possible to see with clarity where this crisis is leading. But nevertheless, there are realities that are consolidated and which have important repercussions for the tasks and mission of the Church. These “realities” would include globalization, the shaping of a global consciousness, marginalization by institutions and the subjectivism of our times.

- *At stake was the fundamental option for the poor,* an option that was at the heart of Christ and has to be an option for His disciples. This point is central to the Theology of Liberation, a theology born on this continent, developed in many books and articles, a theology criticized by some and highly valued by others. While there have been some misconceptions, at the same time, this view has generated life and born fruit in the Latin American soil. This last point is born out by this Fifth Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops. Cardinal Bertone, the Secretary of State, when addressing some journalists on the eve of the Pope’s visit, has said it well: “*Some theology of liberation is not contaminated by doctrines that are foreign and opposed to the Christian faith, like Marxist doctrine, but belong to the Church with the fullest authority.*”<sup>4</sup>

- *At stake was overcoming tension.* “We are tired of tension. We don’t want to go on with these internal conflicts. We want to get beyond situations where we have wasted so much time awakening the suspicions of Rome and damaging trust among ourselves. We don’t want to repeat the animosities of Santo Domingo” (Luiz Demétrio Valentini).<sup>5</sup> For him, the climate and the spirit of the assembly were a new step in the direction of greater communion. This new climate presupposes “an attitude of holy listening” stressed by the Pope in his

<sup>4</sup> “È ancora il continente della speranza,” *30 Giorni* n.4, XXV (April, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> “Continent of Hope,” *Tablet* (19 May, 2007).

homily at the opening mass of the conference. It is thus that we can arrive at the consensus we so desire, which was so much a part of the Church in the beginning.

- *At stake also was a spirituality, which should accompany the men and women of this continent* who use a theological lens to interpret their lives and thus, little by little, build a tradition. It is out of such a theology that a spirituality is born, a new spirituality that can unite the struggle for justice with a profound ecological concern and with popular religiosity. Benedict XVI says that these are the qualities that reflect the soul of the Latin American people.

- *At stake was the relation between what religion can offer and what people demand.* Latin America continues to have religious needs. Despite predictions to the contrary, religion will continue to increase, but the unbridled desire “to have” marked by production and profit, poses a complex of questions, without responses, about what it means “to be” and about life itself. In response to these huge questions, what the church is offering seems of little value. Consequently, many Christians without the Church will emerge.

- *At stake was the need to discover the tension between the real church and the one we want.* The one we want follows more the line of the People of God, a community of communities that transforms itself into an opportunity to live out an experience of fraternal service. To take a stance in the church is to place oneself with the poor. To do this, we must create the conditions. I have the impression that Aparecida has sown these seeds. We hope that the conditions are there to germinate and to grow, and, of course, to flourish and bear fruit.

- *At stake was the theology that would underlie the pastoral proposal, the spirituality and the cultural framework of CELAM V.* It was proposed that the theology be Biblical, Christological, inspired by Vatican II and in the theological tradition of the continent. Some were concerned that the theology of liberation be left out and for this reason, a noted journalist, Marco Politi of *La Repubblica* and Cardinal Renato Martino had raised their voice. Cardinal Rodriguez Maradiaga and John Allen Jr. of the *National Catholic Reporter* had come out in favor. The Pope made the point in a conversation with journalists on the flight to Sao Paolo that for him, the situation of the theology of liberation had changed profoundly. There were other winds blowing.

- *At stake was the future of the Catholic faith on the continent.* Many bishops felt that Catholicism and the Christian values of Latin America did not confront the same problems as Europe and North America. In those places, along with a better economy, there was a weakening of faith, solidarity, fraternity and justice.

The Pope recognized that these same weaknesses are coming to Latin America. “One can detect a certain weakening of Christian life in society overall and of participation in the life of the Catholic Church, due to secularism, hedonism, indifferentism, and proselytism by numerous sects, animist religions and new pseudo-religious phenomena.”<sup>6</sup> This recognition of the reality calls for a revitalization of our faith in Christ. There is a need to stop the process and offer alternatives.

- *At stake was an awareness of the reality of our world, of the fact that life itself is threatened.* The first watershed of the conference was to open our eyes and become aware of the fact that we as church are part of the reality of this continent which is in constant flux. The joys, hopes, sorrows and anguish are those of the disciples of Jesus (Cf. GSp1). The church is embedded in the reality of our people and has been sent to establish a world of justice, solidarity and peace (Luke 4:18-20). Therefore, at stake was to say something and do something about reducing the poverty, crying out against the unjust distribution of the goods of the earth and supporting the agendas of the United Nations for this third millennium. For this, the Assembly, with much authority, voted to send a telegram to the heads of state and government that would meet in Heiligendamm, Germany from June 6 to 8. “We Catholic bishops, meeting for the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops in Aparecida, Brazil, acknowledging our responsibility as shepherds of our people who suffer so much from the consequences of the unjust relationship between poor and rich countries, appeal to you, the leaders of state and government of the G8 summit, meeting in Heiligendamm that you guide the world economy towards a human development that is ecological and sustainable, based on justice, solidarity and the common good. Along with Pope Benedict XVI in his letter to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, we are convinced that one of the most urgent tasks of our times is to eliminate extreme poverty before 2015 by making the necessary resources available. This is inseparably linked with peace and the security of the world.” (At Aparecida, May 30, 2007)

- *At stake was a *datur tertium*, going beyond one and the other, seeing things in a new and alternative perspective.* I was hoping the Pope would shed light on this task. Help did come when he told us that the option for the poor was simply the option of Jesus. Cardinal Bergoglio made the same point when, in his homily, he put the action of the missionary disciples between two important points: the mystery of God and the margins of humanity. The Church cannot be self-referential. It has to be missionary. It is not agnostic, but engaged in worship and prayer. Cardinal Errázuriz, in the closing Eucharist, finds in Mary, the model missionary and disciple, a key to this alternative perspective, which is a middle

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, op. cit.

road between the charismatic movement and the theology of liberation. This is a position distinct from one or the other, yet it is still “something.” It is not “either...or,” nor “both...and.” It is something distinct. It is not a middle term. It is different; something that should divide us less and put us in contact with the paschal grace. I came to this conference looking for signposts and orientation to walk in this direction. I was convinced that this integration, this *datur tertium* had to be first lived and only later explained. Only men and women who know how to position themselves above differences and see the differences not as differences *per se*, but as complements, can take this important step in their lives and talk about something new and converging.

*Quo vadis, Aparecida?* In preparing for Aparecida, some were asking this question and evoking the story of Peter. The apostle, filled with fear at his impending martyrdom, was fleeing Rome. On the Appian Way, some kilometers from the city, Christ approached him carrying the cross. As he drew near, Peter asked him, “*Quo vadis, Domine?*” “Where are you going, Lord?” and Jesus responded, “I am going to carry the cross one more time since you do not want to do it and are therefore abandoning my people.”

Where will Aparecida go? Should I wager it will engage the issues critically confronting this continent and with urgency? Can I assume that Christians and their communities will cease “to have” missions and “become” missionaries? Will there be a conversion to the Kingdom within our church? Will the structures of exclusion be abandoned in order to embrace structures of inclusion and sharing? Will there be sufficient boldness to remain in the heart of the continent, in the large cities, in the shanty towns (*favelas*), in the base communities, at the centers of decisions and within divided families? Will we be in position to call and to send, to inspire and testify and, in all, to avoid the temptation to flee? The Church in Aparecida *has witnessed an opportunity. It has received an authentic call from the Lord to undertake a task that is not new, yet is still very urgent.* This task is very simple; to turn and find oneself with the Lord who is the keystone of our lives. Without this kerygmatic encounter, Catholicism will continue to weaken until it loses all vigor and force. *We Catholics cannot have our arms crossed. History moves forward day by day.* We need to be involved in the dynamics of the Kingdom of God.

Today, this continent requires something unscripted in order to overcome the situation in which we find ourselves. For this, we need many and good missionaries. *This demands a missionary conversion and a missionary zeal.* This is what permits us to draw close to those who are alienated, to go into the streets and to transform the Eucharistic offering into an act of thanksgiving. There we can disperse those of proud heart and raise the humble. Thus we engender faith suffusing the cross that saves and gives life. Aparecida has managed to loosen our feet allowing the movement we hoped for and it has

given the order to depart. Let us go forward.

[Translated from Spanish by Thomas E. Splain, Filo S. Hirota and *Asian Christian Review*]