

# Aparecida 2007: An Experience, A Testimony, A Reflection

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The Fifth General Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops has ended and now truly begins the work of the Church in Latin America to put the results into action. We saw on television last week Dom Geraldo Magella, former president of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), handing to the Pope the conclusions of the Conference. It is now necessary to wait for the definite approval of the Vatican so that the document<sup>2</sup> can be examined in its official version.

However, the document that we have access to now, albeit provisional, already allows us to have a glimpse of some points that let us foresee the course the Latin American Church will take in the coming years.

Naturally, any reading is partial and situated in context. Mine is no exception. I attended the Conference as an adviser to the delegates of the CNBB. There were five theologians and I was the only woman. It is from this position and point of view that I write although other readings are obviously possible.

My essay has the tone of both a report of an **experience** as well as a **testimony**. It is not without exception that somebody who is theologian by grace and by choice has an opportunity to experience such an ecclesial event. At the same time, I intend to offer a **reflection** here on some aspects of the concluding document. I am hoping that it will help provoke and stimulate the dialogue.

## An Experience of Openness to Dialogue

Perhaps one of the most positive points that someone like me, who attended the Conference itself, experienced is its overall atmosphere. One could feel a genuine wish of dialogue and a sincere effort in working towards it. It was a consensus felt, if not stated, that the Latin American Church did not want to repeat the event of Santo Domingo, which was so difficult and painful in many aspects. There was a wish for Aparecida to go on in a different ambience and tone.

As always, there were difficulties and conflicts as human acts are not totally redeemed nor permeated by grace that transfigures everything. But there was

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a genuine wish that the event be held under an atmosphere of fraternity and unity and thanks to the efforts of many, it was achieved in certain degree.

The experience was that of being in the epicentre of a great ecclesial event that is not isolated from, but in continuity with others. The line of tradition and memory brought the lights and shadows, the scars and the remedies of previous conferences, under which the Latin American continent strived with courage and tenacity to change from being a reflexive Church (*Igreja-reflexo*) to be a generative Church (*Igreja-fonte*).

It is apparent from the beginning of the concluding document that Aparecida did not disdain this continuity. In paragraph 16, it says “this 5th General Conference is celebrated in continuity with the other four that preceded it in Rio de Janeiro, Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo. With the same spirit which animated them, the shepherds want to now give a new impulse to evangelization, in order that these peoples continue to grow and mature in their faith, to be light of the world and witnesses of Jesus Christ with their own life.” They already notice the enormity of the challenge they will have to face: “[we are conscious that] after the 4th General Conference in Santo Domingo, many things have changed in the society. The Church that participates in the joys and hopes, the pains and delights of its children, wants to walk along side with them in this period of so many challenges, always instilling hope and consolation to them “.

The position where I was was not central in this great event. As an adviser of the Brazilian delegates, I followed the whole event while being housed with them in the Bom Jesus Seminary of the diocese of Aparecida. From such an angle, I feel obliged to report a double feeling. On the one hand was an immense pride to be part of this church with such a strong prophetic and daring tradition. Some of the suggestions and contributions of the CNBB to the document were of enormous valiance and prophetic courage. For example, that concerning an age of lay ministry amidst the reality that more than 70 % of the Catholic faithful are deprived of the Sunday Eucharist (item 3.5 of the chapter I; item 3 of the chapter III); or the recovering of the model of the Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) and of the method SEE-JUDGE-ACT (*VER-JULGAR-AGIR*) as structural in the identity of the Latin American Church.

On the other hand, there were other ecclesial moments that were somewhat painful though conciliating. Our episcopal conference, despite the respect it enjoys and the import it has in this kind of event, no longer shows its previous vigour. There were deep changes in the face of our episcopate and the protagonists of Medellín and Puebla feel the weight of the years passed, that they have not yet found the dynamism of a closely-knit team amidst a changing ecclesial reality and a radically changing world.

My experience in the 5th Conference thus brought me into a position to be able to share the discouragements and hopes, the dismays and joys of our

bishops; and at the same time to note, sometimes with pain in the soul, its weariness in having to fight the same struggles and to face the same obstacles. Indeed it is about an episcopate with members who are at the front of the times and have the prophetic charisma to watch over and steer the Church. But it does not come through in opening a way amidst an Episcopal conference which seems to follow a different course.

The itinerary of the production of the document was rough. In the beginning there were four editorial staffs. Time passed and while aware of how little time was left and with four becoming three, it was finally opted that we worked not in subcommissions and commissions anymore but directly in the plenary session. The commission of editorial staff had the responsibility to adopt the suggestions for amendments in *“iuxta modum”* and incorporate them into the text. I refer once more to some aspects that I have extracted from the document, again recalling that these comments are mine, a fruit of my reading and perception of the provisional text.

### **The Eloquence and Silences of the Text**

The question of methodology was a source of conflict and not pacifying at all. Agitation pervades the whole text and is still evident in this almost final text that we now have on hand. Undeniably the document is much more grounded and better than Santo Domingo, but there is not the prophetism and liberating breath that characterize Medellín and Puebla. Therefore, in spite of the fact that it preserves the SEE-JUDGE-ACT method, it does it in its particular way, which is quite different from that in Medellín and Puebla. That reflects the change of face of the Latin American Church on which, after twenty-six years, the mark of significant transformations in its episcopate is left visible.

Already in the document of synthesis, SEE was placed within the gaze of God the Father, which many felt as a diminution in objectivity for analysing the reality. It is true that this bias was reduced in the concluding document. To arrive at the current form, however, the journey was slow and laborious, with many struggles in pains and words throughout the sessions of the Conference and the outcome of SEE is quite different from the objectivity of Medellín and Puebla.

The analysis is preceded by a spiritual reflection with a charismatic overtone which, with abundant expressions of praise, thanksgiving and joy, has a clear objective to give a special and specific tone to the analysis that will follow. The introductory paragraph *‘Primeira Parte’* where SEE is discussed explains it clearly:

“This document continues the practice of the method ‘see, judge and act’ used in previous Latin American General Episcopal Conferences. Many voices coming from the whole Continent offered contributions and suggestions, affirming that this method has helped us in living out

more intensely our vocation and the mission in the Church, enriched our theological and pastoral work, and in general motivated us to assume our responsibilities regarding actual situations on our continent. This method allows us to articulate in a systematic way the believer's perspective of reality; the adopting of criteria from faith and reason for discerning and evaluating with critical sympathy; and consequently, the acting out as the missionary disciples of Jesus Christ. The faithful, joyful and trustful following of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the participation in ecclesial life are considered indispensable in guaranteeing the relevance of this method." (n. 19)

It is affirmed moreover, in n. 42, following a quotation of the Pope's inaugural speech that "only the one who recognizes God understands the reality and can respond to it in ways that are adequate and really human." With this, it seems to "baptize" with strong emphasis a reading of the reality, bringing it into the ecclesial vision. In times of post-modernity and challenge to the grand narratives, the affirmation of this paragraph can spark off many discussions:

"The society that coordinates its activities with nothing more than information believes that it can operate as if God did not exist. But the efficacy of the procedures achieved by means of information, albeit with the most developed technologies, still does not manage to satisfy the yearning for dignity inscribed most profoundly in the human vocation. For this reason, it is not enough to suppose that the mere diversity of points of view, of options and finally, of information, that we usually receive in the name of plurality or multiculturalism, will resolve the absence of a unitary meaning for everything that exists. The human person is, in essence, naturally where the variety of meanings converge into a unique vocation with a sense of purpose. The human person is not scared of the diversity, but rather of being unable to assemble all these meanings of reality into a unitary comprehension that allows one to exercise one's freedom with discernment and responsibility. The person always looks for the truth of one's being, since it is this truth that illuminates reality in such a way that it could unfold in freedom and happiness, with joy and hope."

However, the fact that the method was opted is an advantage, a method that is faithful to the perspective and to the way of understanding and perceiving of the Church in Latin America. Chapter 2 gives evidence of this advantage when it does an accurate and objective analysis of the reality that concerns the missionary disciples as a community of faith that is prepared to follow Jesus Christ.

The document admits, of course, the challenges that are present in the world and on our continent. There are significant changes in progress with the universal mutating state: 1) religious pluralism and the loss of the hegemony

of historical Christianity; 2) necessity of ecumenical and macro-ecumenical dialogue in greater scale; 3) a vertiginous increase and spread of poverty and the presence of injustice on the continent, which has been escalating for decades, culminating in this present calamitous state (it is scandalous that the continent of hope, the continent with the largest Catholic population of the world has a third of its inhabitants under the poverty line); 4) the post-modern culture with the new technologies (cellular, Internet, etc.) which transformed from the conception of human existence in its corporeity and identity to that in human and communitarian relations; 5) a change in the reception of the norms and directions of the Church, ie. the personal synthesis that many Catholics make regarding morals or lifestyle that does not always or hardly ever correspond to what the Church teaches. And even so, these Catholics do not feel they are outside the Church. In other words, evangelization needs to pay attention to such current new forms of believing.

When one deals with the ecclesial SEE, however, there is a certain silence or some views that ought to be noted. I am referring to the general tone of the document, which seems to be excessively confessional and hardly ecumenical. In spite of several paragraphs devoted to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, the general tone sounds somewhat “ad intra.”

From the beginning, it is said that we “felt supported by the prayers of our Catholic people, represented visibly by the company of Pastors and the faithful in Aparecida and by the multitude of pilgrims from Brazil and other countries of America the Sanctuary, which edified and evangelized us. In the communion of the saints, we have got with us all those who preceded us as disciples and missionaries in the vineyard of the Lord, especially the Latin American saints among whom is St Toribio de Mogrovejo, the patron of the Latin American Episcopate.” (n. 3)

It so follows throughout the whole document. It is clear that it is a Catholic document made for Catholics, with a deep concern about the decline in the number of the Catholic laity and all the efforts to minimize this exodus. One cannot perceive a real desire of opening to and including the members of other Christian churches, not to mention those of other religions.

The document mentions both the bright and dark sides in the Latin American ecclesial life, continuing in the line that makes the Catholic Church the centre of concern. On the bright side, it talks about the Catholic heritage of the continent, the Catholic faith of the Latin American people and the harvests it can reap from this heritage of many centuries. On the dark side, it speaks about an excessive secularization of a sizable segment of the Church like, for example, the religious life, and the necessity to overcome this situation. It also talks about the significant loss of Catholics to the Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and other religions.

Coupled with this is a decrease in priestly vocation, and of the body of

faithful, etc. The document calls upon the Catholic faithful to surpass these obstacles and count on strengths like: the family, the first agent of evangelization (even though such a notion does not seem to correspond any more to the pluriform reality of Catholic Latin American families); the parish, the diocese and the movements. The solutions that the document presents for overcoming problems that the Christian life of the continent is facing are, in my opinion, still timid and not daring. I cite as example the problem of many Catholic communities not being able to receive the Eucharist on Sundays because of the lack of priests. They are thus deprived of the central mystery of Catholicism. The CNBB, in the comments that it sent to the document of participation, deals courageously with this problem and proposes daring and interesting solutions. It affirms, for example, that it is true that “the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church” and the fact that 80% of Brazilian Catholics are hindered from celebrating the Eucharist every Sunday means that they are deprived of an important dimension of their ecclesiality. It suggests reconsidering the question of lay ministry and the possibility of recovering married priests. In contrast, the document [of Aparecida] presents the problems, but not the solutions. It says that those unable to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday should try to participate devoutly in the celebration of the Word (which, as a matter of fact, they are already doing) and should pray for priestly vocations. It shows, therefore, that the Church still adopts the traditional way of overcoming this type of problems and that it does not intend to introduce any significant newness in handling the problem.

In sum, the reality that the document exposes is more personal than structural and it seems to stay in distance from the ardent and indignant tone of the documents of previous conferences. It aims more at transforming this reality that is not yet reconciled through individual conversion, a task which will be left to missionary disciples who will announce the Good News to the four corners of the continent.

### **A Christology “from above” and an Ecclesiology of Contraposition**

Though theology seems to be almost entirely absent in the explication of the text of the document, there exists without doubt a theology from bottom that permeates the whole text. However, it seems to us that there is something disturbing with its Christology, which is clearly a Christology “from above”. As what is illustrated in the texts almost totally comes from the Gospel of John, it seems to us that the Christology that composes Chapter 4 of the document is lacking a more down-to-earth approach, more attention to the historical Jesus and to his humanity and quotations from his public life which calls disciples to follow his footsteps on the earth and which goes amidst human encounters at the crossroads of life, e.g. where there is the wounded on the way, or when the prostitute invades the banquet, etc.

It seems to us that much needed are quotations from the Synoptic Gospels, which relate more to the reality of the historical Jesus. The portrayal of Jesus is put forward straightly and does not afford the readers a chance to linger longer on his person and his deeds. That will have to be done subsequently in the work that follows the Conference and the document.

Like Christology, like ecclesiology. The ecclesiology of the document reflects the Christology that underlies and inspires it. This hierarchical and compartmentalized ecclesiology seems very far from the illuminating model of the People of God in the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council.

It is advocated – even though sometimes not explicit – that the new movements are a great source of hope for the revitalization of Catholicism in the continent. For example, while talking about the formative itinerary of the disciple, the scheme almost integrally uses that of a known new movement, the Neo-Catechumenal Way. (section 6.2 of the chapter 6). While referring to the base communities, it mentions in the same section the small communities, which are those of the new movements.

Since these new movements comprise in majority or totality people of the middle class, there is a change of place for the poor and popular classes as subjects of the Church and of evangelization, although they are mostly mentioned as objects of evangelization and of meeting with Jesus Christ. However, in the list of “places of meeting ” with Christ (Bible, *Lectio Divina*, Eucharist, Liturgy, prayer, etc.) the poor, afflicted and ill come in the last place (cf. n. 264-272).

In my opinion, the 5th Conference confronted some, but not all of these challenges. I believe that the conception of evangelization that emanates from the document takes into account the loss of the hegemony of historical Christianity and re-shapes evangelization in terms of quality and not of quantity. But it seems to me that in terms of the urgency of dialogue, of interacting with the other, of including the excluded, the answer is still somewhat timid. It is necessary to wait to see if, after the definite approval of the document by the Holy See, the document can be reworked to produce new, bolder answers to these challenges.

I believe that the renewal that the bishops intend and that which is explicit in the document implies a Church where the hierarchy plays well the role of a conductor. I do not see in the document the flexibility that the Vatican Council has brought with the concept of the People of God. I believe that, for the document, the primary leadership of the Church to be renewed are bishops and clergy. The document speaks sufficiently, however, of lay adults, in so much that evangelization comes only when the lay people come etc. In this point, it certainly resonates the Council. It seems to me, however, that the post-conciliar theology regarding the identity and mission of the laity

is not contemplated in the document, in so much as when one insists again that the lay people should work in the world, in secular structures, that that is their place. This means that the paradigm that governs the ecclesiology of the document is one based on the counterposition of clergy vs. laity and not what is expressed in the post-conciliar theology of Bruno Forte and others, one that is about a community of fruitful interaction – ministries.

In my opinion, no new way is opened for the laity, who are called to assume the lion's share of evangelization and continental mission. In contrast, some ways that were already opened are realized, at least put according to plan if not carried out. The issue is that the Church is still very much centered on the hierarchy and the clergy, which the document delineates and with which it intends to renew the identity and the Catholic mission of the continent. Equally, in spite of some good and substantial paragraphs, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue are obscured by the tone of the document. The insistence in the Catholic identity of the Latin American people as the greatest of graces, the repeated and countless mentions to the Virgin Mary as the model of disciple, evangelizer and missionary, etc. show that the audience of the document are Catholics but not the Christians of the continent. In my opinion, that mars a little the dream of a continental mission since for such a task, it would be necessary to gather together the strength of all the Christians of the continent. In this respect, ecumenism would play an important role.

On the other hand, there are important achievements that seem to be maintained and underscored. The option for the poor is present and alive in the document, even emphasized (n. 405-412). The image of the martyrs' faces, so eloquent in the document of Puebla, reappears here with a wealth of details (n. 426-449) and new faces: drug addicts, the sick, migrants, etc.

The recognition of violence as a major problem to be tackled with courage and vivid clarity is a highly positive point. Cf. n. 78:

“The social life of harmonious and peaceful coexistence is deteriorating seriously in many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean with the increase in violence, which manifests itself in thefts, assaults, kidnappings, and even more seriously, in murders that destroy more human lives every day and fill families and the entire society with pain. Violence appears in diverse forms and has diverse agents: organized crime, drug trafficking, paramilitary groups, communal violence especially in the periphery of the big cities, violence of juvenile groups and increasing domestic violence. The causes are multiple: idolatry of money, the onslaught of an individualistic utilitarian ideology, disrespect to the dignity of every person, deterioration of the social fabric, corruption even in the police and the absence of a public politics of social equity.”

Thus the necessity and importance of opening a way to the lay people so that they assume a pro-active place in society and in the Church is affirmed once

again (cf. n. 189 and others): The greatest efforts of parishes in the beginning of the third millennium must be directed towards the calling and formation of missionary lay people. Only through the increase of them will we be able to go so far as to answer to the current missionary requirements. It is also important to remember that the specific field of the laity's evangelizing activity is the complex world of work, culture, the sciences and the arts, the politics, the mass media and the economy, as well as the contour of the family, education, professional life, especially in the contexts where the Church becomes present only through them.

### **Conclusion: Trying to Salvage an Interpretation**

It seems to me that faith in God as Love, which is the heart of the gospel, is the most important point to be disseminated in the culture of our people. Christianity has love as its central message and therefore it must propose and announce clearly that God is Love in order to be faithful to the message it bears. However, the love that the gospel of Jesus Christ proposes is a love deeply "infected" by justice, by a passion for justice and by the repudiation of injustice of any kind. In this sense, it seems to me that the document contains good passages in this direction, but it does not make love as central in its content.

Therefore, it seems to me that post-conference work is going to be basic. There is a chance, from the many good passages that the document offers, of cultivating the day-to-day tasks of the church and of the People of God in terms of faith in God's love. And this God of Love hears the outcries of the people. Love is revealed not as love idyllically borne only for consoling troubled hearts, but as pardon before violence, as justice before poverty and oppression, as openness before the different and the other, as a disposition to accept conflicts in order to build peace. I believe that after Aparecida, it would be very important to work in the Catholic Christian communities towards faith in God, amidst all the lovelessness and hatred in daily life. Only by doing so might the gospel present itself intact as Good News without concessions or diminutions.

The document presents good opportunities for this hermeneutic work since it contains extremely beautiful, evangelical and valuable passages. I take for instance n. 367-368, which depicts the foremost examples of Christ that have been enlivening Latin America in the past decades:

"Jesus, the good shepherd, wants to communicate to us his life and to put himself to the service of life. We see it when he approaches the blind person on the way (cf. Mc 10, 46-52), when he dignifies the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4, 7-26), when he cures the patients (cf. M 11, 2-6), when he feeds the hungry (cf. Mc 6, 30-44), when he liberates the possessed (cf. Mc 5, 1-20). In his Kingdom of life Jesus includes all: he eats and drinks with sinners (cf. Mc 2, 16), not minding being regarded a glutton

and drunkard (cf. M 11, 19); he touches lepers (cf. Lc 5, 13), he lets a prostitute anoint his feet (cf. Lc 7, 36-50) and at night he receives Nicodemus and invites him to be born again (cf. Jn 3, 1-15). Equally he invites his disciples to reconciliation (cf. M 5, 24), to the love of one's enemies (cf. M 5, 44), to the option for the poorest (cf. Lc 14, 15-24)."

In his Word and in all the sacraments Jesus offers us food for the way. The Eucharist is the vital center of the universe, capable of satisfying the famine of life and happiness: "The one that eats me will live by me" (Jn 6, 57). In this happy banquet we take part of the eternal life and our daily existence turns into an extension of Mass. But all the gifts of God need a suitable disposition to produce fruits of conversion. In particular, they demand a spirit of community, the opening of one's eyes to recognize him and serve him among the poorest: "In the humblest we find Jesus himself." That's why St John Chrysostom exhorted: "Do you wish to honor the body of Christ? Do not ignore him when he is naked. Do not pay him homage in the temple clad in silk, only then to neglect him outside where he is cold and ill-clad."

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