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TEN YEARS OF CHANGE IN THE CHURCH: PUEBLA AND THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Ten Years of Change in the Church:
Puebla and the Future

The meeting of the Latin American bishops at Puebla faithfully reflected both the state and the direction of the Church. The final document showed a rather surprising commitment to consolidate many changes underway since the Medellín conference, some 10 years earlier, notably reiterating the Church's "option" for the poor and its support for "base communities." These rapid changes have been the product of three forces in particular: new theological directions, what came to be the Theology of Liberation; organizational change within the Church, at the local, national, and international levels; and the specific regional context of military authoritarian regimes. That context has propelled the Church into sharp conflicts with political authority, conflicts that during the past 10 years have created substantial consensus within the Church around socially-progressive "pastoral" activism. Its unity and influence in the future will be determined to a significant degree by how much military regimes move toward more open, democratic politics. The Church's own actions now tend to push them in that direction in a variety of ways, but the institution may be divided by political issues if redemocratization does occur. The base communities are the key to the Church's strategy of evangelization and "liberation," and the way they evolve will greatly affect the Church's whole future direction.

TEN YEARS OF CHANGE IN THE CHURCH: PUEBLA AND THE FUTURE

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The Puebla meeting of the Latin American bishops in early 1979 capped a decade of far-reaching and surprising change in the Catholic Church. A new, local-level unit--the "ecclesial base community"[1] or CEB--has given Catholicism a vitality in society it has not known for centuries. At the same time, the Church has achieved an unprecedented integration as an institution nationally and regionally, in Latin America as a whole. It has found itself, through an unexpected historical dynamic, increasingly committed to the cause of the poor in deed as well as word. And it has been thrust into political confrontations with state authority throughout the region with an intensity and scope unmatched since the nineteenth century.

Puebla faithfully reflected both the state and the direction of the Latin American Church.[2] The text of the final document, and the process by which it was produced, showed clearly the co-existence within the Church of divergent and at times directly opposed points of view. At the same time, however, the meeting demonstrated a surprising consensus in the Church--remarkable in view of the rapid changes it has undergone in the last 10 years--about its past experience, its present context, and its future direction.

The Puebla document endorsed the fundamental lines set out at Medellín in 1968, which marked such an innovative departure at the time:[3] an identification with the poor and oppressed, a sociological analysis of "structural sin," of "institutionalized injustice" and "institutionalized violence," of poverty produced by "mechanisms of oppression" and the need for rapid "structural change." Where Puebla departed from Medellín, it frequently went beyond earlier positions. This was particularly true of its political analysis, which was notably clearer and more specific in its condemnation of dictatorial regimes.[4]

Puebla, much more than Medellín, was a product of the collective experience of the Latin American Church. Medellín was a kind of manifesto for the Church produced by its more progressive sectors (although the radical Catholic Left was disappointed with it at the time). But Puebla, despite early efforts to manage the outcome, turned into an encounter quite representative of different forces found in the Church today. The final document records their efforts to make sense of their experience in the last decade. It is significant for both the consensus and the divisions it reports.

This essay is an analysis of the 10 years of change that preceded and produced Puebla. It is an interpretation of the conditions and forces--outside as well as within the Church--that brought the Church to the state reflected there. And it offers a way of thinking about what this broad process of change signifies for the future.

What was it, first, that gave the ideas of Medellín such deep resonance in the Church? Why have they so significantly oriented what it has actually done, rather than remaining, as so many other Church documents have, statements of good intentions? Second, how much does a socially progressive posture really characterize the Church as a whole? Will this stance be a source of growing consensus in the future, or of increasing division? Third, very much related to the previous question, what kind of a role is the Church likely to play in the future in society and politics as a whole? What are the factors that will shape its direction and influence?

I

The new theological directions marked out by Medellín had the impact on Church action they did because of their congruence with the particular historical setting in which they emerged. In a longer line of theological change, they built upon Vatican II and anticipated the Theology of Liberation. At Medellín the bishops were attempting to adapt the ideas and insights of the Council to Latin American reality. But they built better than they knew. Dynamic forces in Latin American societies and within the Church itself reinforced new theology to push change toward consequences they did not foresee.

Although students of the Church frequently see new theology at the root of institutional change, doctrinal positions are hardly ever fully implemented merely because they are directives from recognized authority. If they resonate within the institution the way that Medellín did, there must be other factors at work. The Church's new commitment to the poor, for example, or its confrontation with the state, would not have taken place in the way they did without the texts of Medellín. But the depth of the change that has occurred is due also to the context of authoritarian military regimes, within which the meaning of new theological formulations (of, for example, "institutionalized violence") has been defined by experience and struggle. The depth of the Church's new social commitments in different countries closely parallels the harshness of their regimes. Where there have not been institutional military governments (e.g. in Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico), the Church has changed its social stance much less, in spite of exposure to the same progressive theology.

On the other hand, however, authoritarian conditions alone were not sufficient to have "forced" the Church into the social and political roles it has assumed. When other associations in society have been repressed, some of their functions have undoubtedly been displaced onto

the Church (about which, more below). But the Church certainly could have chosen to fight much less than it has; it often so chose in the past. That it has begun to put itself on the line in the last decade is the result of courage and leadership--sometimes from the Hierarchy, often from priests, nuns, and lay people at local levels (Smith*; compare Vallier, 1970). Their courage has been fortified and enlightened by the new theology of the last ten years. Under conditions of the authoritarian regimes, concepts, such as "structural sin," Christian "liberation," concientización, and "human rights" have helped them make sense of their environment and their responsibilities in it.

Without important organizational changes, however, the Church would have lacked the institutional resources to resist authoritarian regimes. At the grass roots, it has created a variety of structures--many of them called comunidades de base--that are smaller, more informal, and more personal than the traditional parish. It has tried through these groupings to engender more authentic religious commitment among its faithful by speaking to their real human problems. Thus it has taken up its fundamental pastoral task in just the way signalled by Medellín, rooting its religious purposes in concrete social situations. The Church is an unquestionably more vital presence in society where these new units have taken hold at the local level (Bruneau, 1978; Della Cava, 1978). At Puebla the bishops gave them a ringing endorsement, recognizing them as a key to the Church's most basic task (e.g., CELAM, 1979: 477-78).

The CEB's have been sustained under repressive conditions by a complementary strengthening of Church structures at higher levels. National episcopal conferences have made each country's bishops aware of a common agenda of national and international issues, and CELAM and CLAR (for the Religious Orders) have gone a long way toward accomplishing that for Latin America as a whole.[5] The new specialized commissions, such as those for Peace and Justice, have used new permanent staff to monitor and respond to situations (such as human rights violations) in an on-going way, within individual nations and across the region. The Church's institutional capacity to know what is going on, and to utilize its linkages abroad for support, has become a critical resource for protecting its social and pastoral initiatives at the local level (Smith*: 116).

II

A "Latin American Church" exists today in several senses it did not a decade ago. As the previous section makes clear, political environments are more similar, theological understandings more shared, institutional integration more established. To close observers 10 years ago, the differences between various national Churches seemed more important than their similarities; change in them suggested a variety of distinctive "profiles" of Church development (Vallier, 1970: 121-47). Today Churches formerly as disparate as those of Brazil and Paraguay, Bolivia and Chile, Ecuador and El Salvador are using the same arguments

to fight similar battles and are comparably committed, in their pastoral missions, to social change (cf. Smith*: 92-111).

The great degree to which a truly regional Church has developed, despite important internal divisions, was established by Puebla. With greater confidence than its Medellín counterpart, Puebla's final document plunged into analysis of different facets of the general regional context--cultural, economic, political--that shapes the Church's mission despite local variations. The document is also willing, with some specificity, to characterize the broad--and as the Church sees them, frequently deteriorating--trends of the region's recent history (e.g., CELAM, 1979: 16-27). Even among bishops who evaluated the situation differently, there was widespread acceptance of a regional perspective and sociological method. The Pope, too--symbol of universality in the Church--seemed pleased rather than threatened by regional solidarities. After expressing cautions in his opening statement at Puebla, his subsequent behavior suggested that he was confident of the Latin American bishops' fidelity in adapting universal truths to regional realities.

The Church's overall position represents a relative triumph for the Catholic Left of a decade ago (Dodson*). (Although different from what those on the Left would have wished, the Church has become more socially committed than they believed possible.) But this position is the outcome of an interplay of forces within the institution. It is a point of balance for a complex coalition more than a uniform conversion to a point of view. To maintain a religious institution encompassing divergent perspectives, the Hierarchy of the Church seeks the position that engenders greatest unity. That position has shifted over the course of the last ten years toward a "structural" understanding of social problems and a widening "pastoral" commitment to the poor and suffering. The dynamic of the Church's historical situation since 1968 has pulled the institution as a whole in the direction of its socially most progressive sectors.

The presence of authoritarian military governments has been crucial. As the bishops re-emphasized with great clarity at Puebla, the Church has come increasingly to view these regimes in regional terms. Where formally it might have distinguished between national cases as different as Paraguay, Chile, and Brazil, it now looks on them all as manifestations of a common economic model (CELAM, 1979: 26) and common National Security ideology (Calvo*; CELAM, 1979: 407-8). The recent political situation of the region has "fit" the new theological directions of the Church with particular aptness. That congruence has effectively moved the point of unity which the Church seeks (e.g., CELAM, 1979: 383, 389, 547) to the left during this period.

In the future, that political environment could become less uniform. There may be openings in some regimes which allow some degree of political participation and open partisan activity. Even

where such openings do not develop into the full political democracy the Church endorses (e.g., CELAM, 1979: 1024) the changed situation will create difficulties, within particular national Churches and between them. To the extent that regimes in the region become more different from one another, the Latin American Church will find it more difficult to interpret them within a common framework.

Politics--political developments in the region and the Church's involvement in them--is likely to be the central issue challenging the consensus that existed at Puebla. The position reached there (which is analyzed in the next section) distinguishes partisan political acitvity, which is not appropriate for the Church, from prophetic and pastoral social activism, which is fundamental to its purposes. The difficulties of making this distinction in practice may well prove as great for the Church in "decompressing" systems in the future as they did in populist situations in the past (most strikingly in Chile, in the late '60's and early'70's). Brazil, whose bishops played such an important part in achieving the progressive consensus at Puebla, is likely to be the key test of Church unity in this regard in the years to come.

The most surprising element of the bishops' consensus at Puebla--their enthusiastic support for ecclesial base communities--will also be tested in the future (and very likely in Brazil, where more CEB's have been created than anywhere else). The bishops were clearly impressed with the promise of the CEB's for religious renewal at the grass roots. The Puebla document designates them as a major instrument for the Church in its fundamental task of evangelization. But the proliferation of CEB's also poses real problems of authority for the Church. The bishops made clear their concerns (CELAM, 1979: 478, 489) that these small groupings be linked institutionally with clerical authority (hence their description as "ecclesial base communities," and not "base communities" alone, as they have frequently been called in practice). Balancing clerical authority over the CEB's with those qualities that give them such promise for evangelization--their responsiveness to personal concerns, their authenticity, their spontaneity--will be a significant challenge to the Church in the future, as the next section analyses in more detail.

III

Puebla made it obvious that the Church will be deeply involved in politics in the future. Its broad understanding of its prophetic and pastoral responsibilities will draw it into basic issues of freedom, equality, justice, participation, and power (cf. Levine and Wilde, 1977). Whether its involvement will be a source of unity and consensus--and will have significant effects on society as a whole--will depend on the nature of its political context. It will also depend on the Church's success in evangelization, the kindling of a genuine religious renewal among Latin America's people.

The Church's involvement in politics is both a paradox and a problem. It is a paradox because that involvement exists in the face of a sincere desire to stay out of politics. The Puebla document was explicit and adamant that the institution must avoid any partisan activity (CELAM, 1979: 386-92). It echoed the opening message of Pope John Paul II in asserting that the Church is a mystery and not a political party, a position that seems in particular to reflect the experience of the Chilean Church. The Church has a problem, as Daniel Levine* writes, (1979:8f,24f) with politics. It would be torn apart from within if it allowed partisan factions to claim its universal truths for their particular programs and politics (CELAM, 1979: 388-89).

Authoritarian regimes, however, make it almost inevitable for the Latin American Church, as it now understands its purposes, to become politically involved. This involvement occurs in several ways, with implications which vary in different coyunturas of these regimes.

The efforts of dictatorships, first, to repress or strictly control manifestly political activity has the effect of displacing pressures and participation into structures which the Church defends as "religious" and its own. To the extent that competition among manifestly political groups is not legitimate, social activists in the Church are freed from easy identification with particular parties or programs. Church unity can more easily be maintained and a pastoral commitment to "the poor" become more significant when it does not operate among different partisan movements claiming to represent them.

The repressive extremes of authoritarian regimes, second, have moved the Church to explicit political statements about the desirability of democracy. The Puebla document is eloquent about the qualities that should characterize the good polity--equal protection under the law, an independent judiciary, more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunity, a guaranteed right for workers and peasants to organize themselves, and repeatedly widespread popular participation (CELAM, 1979: 924-29, 998-1014). The bishops see all this as falling within the Church's larger pastoral mission, as "Mother and Teacher of all." They expect resistance but express confidence that the Church will pursue it to its "ultimate consequences" (CELAM, 1979: 93-94, 381, 385).

Particularly in an authoritarian setting, third, the Church has become an advocate of political pluralism and social "space" for institutional as well as theological reasons (CELAM, 1979: 967-1014). In a society of demobilized organizations and intervened institutions, the Church is determined to insist on autonomy in its own religious sphere (CELAM, 1979: 381). As the Chilean bishops said in 1976, "To define the limits of our pastoral competence, we recognize the authority only of the Roman Pontiff" (Roncagliolo and Reyes Matta, 1978: 177).[6] In condemning the "totalitarian" implications of National Security Doctrine, the Church both rejects many of the policies that the ideology is used to justify and affirms its own Social Doctrine, which stresses the importance of intermediary bodies between the individual and the state. But even more fundamentally, the Church rejects the presumption

of National Security Doctrine that its values have some overriding primacy in society (Roncagliolo and Reyes Matta, 1978: 45-62). The Church, "expert in humanity" (CELAM, 1979: 379, 1028), asserts a right to articulate social values and goals that is autonomous of the state, any state.[7]

As Puebla made clear, the Church sees this mission as quite distinct from politics and does not intend to be deterred from pursuing it, in both its pastoral and prophetic faces. But beyond its possible confusion with politics, there is a further difficulty the Church will face with its broad sense of its pastoral responsibilities. The basic image of the shepherd, the pastor, and his flock evokes a relationship of leader and followers of a more traditional kind than seems to be evolving in the contemporary Church. Lo pastoral involves clerical solidarity with the poor and suffering ("compartir los angustias": CELAM, 1979: 16-20) as well as their "formation" under clerical tutelage, and pastors seem to undergo concientización as well as their flocks. Both sides of pastoral action are reflected in the Puebla document. Although individual bishops will undoubtedly draw different lines about what is legitimately pastoral, observers at Puebla were impressed by their sincerity about pastoral concerns. The fact that they made them as central as they did, and accepted the basic direction of change since Medellín, suggests that the Church will become still more active socially in the future.

Whether that activity will have significant effect depends on how firmly the Church's role is rooted in religious commitment at the local level. Ultimately its impact will turn on the efficacy and the extent of initiatives such as the new "base communities." Although they have proliferated rapidly in some areas (Della Cava, 1978; Bruneau, 1978), we do not really know yet how widespread these communities are or may become (estimates run to 100,000 and more for Latin America as a whole). But we can already make some preliminary observations about the effects of those that do exist.

As a fundamental unit of the Church, the base communities differ from the parish in several ways. They are smaller and typically involve much more active lay participation, both in liturgical ceremonies and in religious study. Characteristically, they have much more uniform social membership than the parish, permitting greater face-to-face communication. As a more informal kind of grouping, they have made most progress where the previous institutional existence of the Church was least established--that is to say, among the poor (Bruneau, 1978). They have tried to reach new social groups by addressing the concrete realities of their social situations in religious terms: this is the ground to the Church's pastoral commitment to authentic "liberation."

In cases such as Chile and Brazil, these local communities--sheltered under the Church's institutional shield--have provided a "surrogate" for otherwise repressed associational life (Smith*: 93-95;

Della Cava, 1978). Where there had previously been political polarization, they have played a specific role in bringing Marxists and Catholics together. They have provided the sites for shared experience, which have given new meaning to their old concepts of "dialogue" and "praxis." It has been a process not so much of one side convincing the other as of both old antagonists realizing they had much more to learn from the other (e.g., Smith*: 94).

It is interesting in this connection to see how the authoritarian setting changes the implications of the Church's role. A fundamental element of its position on social change since 1968 has been the insistence of its centrist Hierarchy on consensus rather than coercion. The Puebla document systematically balanced its denunciation of dictatorial repression with condemnation of revolutionary violence (e.g., CELAM, 1979: 393-94). In the more open environment of polarized populist politics, this emphasis on consensus was viewed by both Left and Right as deceptive and divisive. But in the authoritarian regime, where the decisive balance of violence lies with the state, to foster consensus among popular forces may be a contribution that progressive forces view much more positively (but see Krischke in Della Cava, 1978).

It is difficult to know yet whether the Church's new base communities will affect social consciousness on a large scale or, by giving their members experience in participation in one setting, facilitate a participatory society more broadly.[8] In a significant case of political "opening" recently, in Brazil, one observer attributed great importance to the Church's grass roots initiatives among the working class of São Paulo, a "vast mobilization . . . in silence, without fanfare, and with all deliberation required for schooling men in a way of life" (Della Cava, 1978: 10). Whether the Church will play that sort of role more generally remains to be seen.

It is difficult, also, to know how well the CEB's will be able to balance their two sides, as "centers of evangelization and engines of liberation and development" (CELAM, 1979: 56); or to put it differently, how well they can reconcile loyalty to the ecclesiastical institution with commitment to their particular small community. We do know that the bishops see them as the "hope of the Church" (CELAM, 1979: 477) and will attempt to create more of them, impelled by falling clerical vocations and a genuine "option" for the poor. On the basis of the authoritarian experience of the last 10 years, we also know, as Levine* (:23) puts it so well, that these communities will at least be "keeping alive hope for a different kind of future."

Puebla was a kind of still photograph that captured a highly dynamic collectivity at a particular point in time. The final document produced by the bishops is shot through with compromises and contradictions, faithfully reflecting the current state of the Church. That the document was as progressive as it was tells us more about the past than the future. It demonstrates that the changes of the past ten years are real--that they have been written into the lives of those who are the Church and cannot be reversed by the intentions of some ecclesiastical elites. But what Puebla will come to mean in the future cannot be extrapolated from the words of the document or from past experience. It will be shaped above all by the political context of particular national Churches, and the degree to which unity and momentum can be maintained around the central purpose of evangelization. Much of that will depend on the leadership of the bishops, and their ability to foster a pastoral authority for new times, within the Church and for society as a whole.

NOTES

1. The Spanish "eclesial" has been translated by "ecclesial," a word now returning to English usage, rather than "ecclesiastical," because the latter would imply inclusion in the canonical structures of the Church.

2. Bouvy, 1978, IDOC, 1978, and MacEoin, 1978, all provide useful collections of articles on the background to Puebla.

3. See the articles by Poblete* and Levine* in Levine, 1978. This essay will draw particularly upon articles in that special issue of this Journal (which will be indicated by an asterisk (*), as above, in the text), and on other papers given originally at a Workshop on The Church and Politics in Latin America, at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. in May 1978.

4. See, e.g., Paragraph 379 in CELAM, 1979. Subsequent references to paragraphs in the provisional Puebla document will be given in the text, viz.: CELAM, 1979: 379.

5. One should not over-emphasize the degree to which continental consensus could be produced by these newly institutionalized regional organizations. The secretariats of the bishops' CELAM and the Orders' CLAR have had significant differences for several years, a conflict which came into the open just before the CELAM meeting in Puebla.

6. The statement by the Permanent Committee of the Chilean Episcopate was made in reaction to the Riobamba incident in Ecuador in August 1976. A meeting in Riobamba to "exchange pastoral experiences" was denounced as "subversive" and forcibly broken up by dozens of heavily armed police. The priests and bishops involved, from throughout the hemisphere, were summarily deported by the Ecuadorian authorities. Roncagliolo and Reyes Matta, 1973, provide a useful documentation.

7. Those who would assert the autonomy of Christian values fight, in effect, for political pluralism in any authoritarian setting. The situation of reformist elements of the Catholic Church in Cuba, who would like to support the Revolution but on their own Christian grounds, is an interesting parallel (see Crahan*: 175, 177).

8. It is worth noting, as Crahan* (174-178) does for the Cuban case, that active participation by lay people in a religious setting by no means precludes their holding conservative social views. Whether such experience has "progressive" implications for a wider environment depends very much on the character of that setting.

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