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A New Social Structure: Grassroots Christian Communities

Traditional Catholics consider grassroots Christian communities outrageous innovations. Military regimes in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay monitor them closely. Historical Protestant churches are pleased with their development and consider them a step in their direction. The Latin American Catholic Church itself responded at Puebla: "We are happy to single out the multiplication of small communities as an important ecclesial event that is peculiarly ours, and as the `hope of the church."(1)

Many influences on the Latin American church converge in the creation of *comunidades de base;* they are profoundly Latin American in their origination. They are also very numerous: some two to three million Latin American Catholics (one million of them in Brazil) take part in these communities. For many participants the experience is so intense that they live their lives largely on the basis of their commitment to the community and to the church.(2)

Basic Christian communities are like living cells in an organism newly coming to life. Generally, twelve to twenty persons make up a community. They usually come together in their neighborhood or village once a week. They read sacred scripture, pray together, and sing hymns. They reflect on what the scriptures mean in their daily lives. That reflection frequently leads them to courses of political action to improve the living conditions in their barrio. Given the repressive political climate in many Latin American countries, such actions have sometimes resulted in failings, deaths, and disappearances (persons are taken to a police station, for example, and are never seen again).

The impact of the basic Christian communities has been enormous on the church and on other sectors of society. For the church they have meant movement at the grass roots, something long overdue and largely unexpected. "If someone had told me twenty years ago that I would be witnessing Catholics, ordinary ones, reading the Bible and caring for one another on the basis of scriptural reflection, and doing this in large numbers, I would have told them they were seriously misled," remarked Reverend William Wipfler, an Episcopalian priest who has been studying the Latin American church for many years.

This major innovation in the life of the Latin American church has distinctive facets that will be discussed in this chapter: social factors that brought the communities to life, new theological emphasis on the local church, types of mature communities, their day-by-day activities, their connection with liberation theology, their political character (with the particular issue of land tenure).

Roots of the New Communities

The communities arose from a variety of factors, many of which converged at the time of Vatican

II and in its aftermath. Most innovations begin with dissatisfactions; so too the creation of the base communities. The immense parishes of the Latin American church, with as many as eighty thousand nominal members, were increasingly recognized as unmanageable organizational units. Priests left the organization, to some extent because of the impossibility of their task. One Brazilian priest wrote earnestly to his parishioners that Catholics were killing their priests with their demands.(3)

Many of these demands were for ritualistic services without much meaning. For some it was clearly a matter of magic, superstition. Even among those who had a more enlightened attitude, questions arose about the "service station" approach, one that had Catholics coming to a *patrón* who dispensed favors and services. Further questions were raised by Vatican II about conferring sacraments on those who had almost no instruction. Indeed many came to believe that emphasis on performing ecclesiastical rites was the curse of the Latin American church.

To respond to the situation several major changes were called for: reduction in scale, instruction in depth, a sense of community, new ministries, and emergence of lay leaders. All this seemed new but reflection on the social environment, emphasis on community, and lay leadership were foreshadowed by lay movements in Latin America that preceded Vatican II and supposedly abrupt changes that took place thereafter.

Some observers have felt that the church had no choice but to found (or allow) grassroots communities. With so few priests and a growing population -- 90 percent nominally Catholic -- the church had to decentralize and welcome lay persons as leaders. But the shortage of priests was not the only, or even the major, reason for the emergence of base communities: the church in many places had been lacking in clergy for decades. Additional factors are needed to explain the birth of the grassroots communities and the direction they have taken.

José Marins, a key figure in the spread of the base communities, recalls that beginning in the 1950s and more evidently in the 1960s priests working in various parts of Latin America began feeling the malaise that comes from working with a parish structure that was out of alignment with pastoral ideology. The parish structure was not achieving the results that enlightened pastors sought. Marins,(4) Aldo Gerna,(5) both in Brazil, and Leo Mahan (6) in Panama began experimenting with alternative parish structures. Their description of the process enlightens one also about the education that took place in the priests themselves. Pastors began by talking with the people, largely to gain support for what the priests had in mind. Little by little they found themselves listening with fewer preconceptions and then acting on the needs expressed by the people.

The same kinds of experimental structures began appearing in isolated parts of Latin America. The innovations were not always spontaneous, for by now communication across diocesan or national lines had very much improved. Experiments were observed and adapted elsewhere. Priests and bishops looking for innovations heard Leo Mahan describe at CICOP meetings the workings of San Miguelito parish in Panama City or they dropped in to see for themselves what was happening there. (Much of the air traffic to and from Latin America passed through Panama.) Theologian Francisco Bravo came to study the parish; Illich's documentation center printed and

circulated his report.

The most evident need for change in structure was reduction in scale. Worshipers found it virtually impossible to relate to strangers in a large church building amid mysterious rites. So the first change that practically all innovators made was to reduce the church community to the smallest human scale. This amounted to the natural grouping one finds in a subneighborhood or village, a grouping of persons who live within a block or two of one another. After further experimentation most communities limited themselves to adults, at least as the most active participants. Over and over pioneer community leaders explained that young children and adolescents were not ready for the communities: "Everyone has to assume mature commitment to one another and the younger ones are not ready."

Membership: Adult and Poor

The concentration on adults represented a major shift in the church's approach to its goals. For decades the majority of the church's educational efforts had been aimed at young children or adolescents through schools or catechetical programs. The church would now attempt to reach children through their parents. Whatever the weakness of this strategy -- given the lack of theological training for most adults -- the approach has the advantage of being "natural" (parents teaching their own children) and of rapidly multiplying the number of pastoral ministers. The approach also gives the church a more mature image. "Previously we were a church of old ladies and young children. I was ashamed as a young man to take part in such an enterprise," recalled a lay leader from northeast Brazil.(7)

The experimentation also laid to rest the "myth of the passive peasant." From the beginning it was clear that there were natural leaders in the groups. At the start of the base community movement many of the priest-innovators selected the leaders; now typically the groups elect the leaders, followed by ratification by the pastor or bishop, usually in a simple ceremony. "These people know one another. They know who can be trusted, who will not lord it over them, and who will move them along without too much friction. Only a very few times have they chosen somebody who turned out to be lazy or unreliable," remarked Father Ralph Rogawski, who has organized base communities in Latin America and the U.S.A.(8)

Many basic communities developed in rural areas, though some can be found in the barrios of cities, as in Cali, Lima, and especially São Paulo. Most participants are rural indigents, campesinos, or have recently migrated to cities. For many members, a base community gave them their first significant contact with Christianity. Few received religious instruction in any systematic manner, though a number had on occasion listened to religious programing from the numerous radio schools that have sprung up in the last twenty years in Latin America. Very few members had read the Bible for themselves.

In terms of social background the vast majority of grassroots community members are rural or urban working-class poor. Few participants belong to the "educated" middle class and even fewer are from the upper class. There are push-pull factors in this social selection. The Latin American church believes that it must give preferential treatment to the poor, especially those on the

margins of society. As Rogawski has said:

> These have been the most neglected historically and it was our duty to readjust our pastoral priorities. There is probably another reason why the base community approach works so well with people who are or who were recently peasants. These people have a spontaneity and a hunger for learning that is missing in other social groups.(9)

Moreover, the community-based cultural orientation of many *campesinos* disposed them toward working and sharing in small groups.

External factors also affected the reordering of pastoral priorities. Among the unchurched campesinos and slum dwellers, sects of various kinds and old-line Pentecostals were making their greatest gains. The loyalties of the poor were under attack.

Other specific factors, already touched on above, inclined the church to its emphasis on working with the poor. The social analysis done for the Medellín and Puebla conferences pointed out the worsening situations of the lower classes. And the bishops' own sense of the people, derived from daily interviews and contacts, disposed them toward seeking innovative changes for the masses.

Shift to Local Church

Once the process of assimilating Vatican II and the new theology behind it was advancing, changes in perspective began taking shape. And myths began to evaporate. Instead of thinking of Latin America as a Catholic region in which it was necessary above all to baptize everyone, instead of worrying about everyone's receiving all the rites, the church, at least its intellectual leadership members, began emphasizing personal commitment (something closely akin to the Evangelical idea of a decision for Christ). In gross terms it meant a shift from quantity to quality.

The new theology emphasized the unity of history, that there are not two worlds, religious and secular. Nor was it necessary for all to be baptized: persons of good will are not excluded from the kingdom of God. Moreover the this-worldly emphasis of Vatican II in building up the world as a preeminently Christian work eased the Latin American church away from some of its fatalistic, otherworldly inclinations. Some of the barnacles of time were being stripped away.

The impact of these ideas would result in new corporate goals. In sum, major objectives would include: instruction in depth, direct use of the Bible, a sense of community, new ministries, the emergence and empowerment of the laity, and emphasis on working at the side of the poor. Grassroots Christian communities fulfill to one degree or another all these objectives. Above all, they bring members a sense that the church is community, not hierarchy. "We say over and over that the base communities are not associations or clubs within the church; they are the church," says José Marins.(10) The weakest achievement of the communities, though, has been training of leaders. As a result, even though members have gained familiarity with the Bible (many have worn out their copies), some base communities tend to develop fundamentalism, at least in the initial stage. "They tend to get over this biblicism, though," judged Archbishop Críspulo Benitez of Barquisimento, Venezuela, after a dozen years of watching the groups operate in his diocese.(11)

Other observers are not as sanguine.

Evangelization emerged as an overriding corporate goal at Vatican II. The church in the U.S.A. is still struggling with formulation of ways by which to accomplish "making Christ known." The Latin American church was ready to respond by the time of the Medellín conference: base communities were seen as the preferred strategy. This was reinforced at the Puebla conference, which emphasized base communities throughout its final document.

Types of Base Communities

One reason confusion has grown up about the *comunidades de base* was their imprecise description as they developed historically. This has sometimes resulted in gross overcounting of communities. In some places priests say that many base communities exist in their parishes-but they are counting every conceivable religious organization. The pastor of a parish with eightythousand members in São Paulo divided it into four sections and called each section a base community.

Historically base communities developed from three different orientations. The first is the post-Medellín type; it has been described above and is best depicted in the writings of José Marins. The second is the group of Catholics (sometimes together with Protestants) who are part of the Pentecostal or charismatic movement. The third is the catechumenate, a much less prevalent form, developed recently in Spain.

Catholic pentecostalism spread in Latin America like fire through a dry field.(12) It was introduced by enthusiasts from a number of non-Latin American countries, but the most influential came from the U.S.A. Francis MacNutt with two Methodist ministers, Joe Pietrie and Tommy Tyson, traveled in 1969 to Peru and Bolivia to begin the movement. They addressed themselves first to groups of twenty to thirty priests and sisters who could understand English. Many of them in turn began using charismatic prayer, Bible study, and sometimes healing among their parishioners and friends. Now no one knows how many Catholic pentecostals there are in Latin America. Estimates range into the millions. The growing number of persons attending local congresses (50,000 at Barquisimeto, Venezuela) or of regional representatives at international congresses (several thousand) speaks for itself.

The charismatic movement allows for greater numbers and less structuralization than do the post-Medellín or catechumenate communities. For example, in Santa Cruz, the second largest city in Bolivia, four thousand persons assemble for services at La Mansión. But more typically they come together as smaller Bible and prayer groups (20 to 75 persons), similar in most outward aspects to the type of community promoted by Marins but "adding a bit of fire and zest," as some commentators have said.

The charismatics have become a major new movement in the life of the Latin American church. Many bishops have joined the movement or welcome it into their dioceses. "I do not agree with some of its emphases but it is hard to criticize the changes the movement has brought about in the lives of many," one bishop said to me.(13) Many adherents believe the movement appeals to the

innate religious sense that Latin Americans are believed to harbor. "We are an expressive people and we need an expressive religion, not the cold and distant formalism one finds in most parish churches," claimed a long-standing Pentecostal member in Santa Cruz.(14)

Pentecostalism provides another transnational network for religious leadership groups in Latin America. These newer groups are typically distinct from the older intellectual or activist leadership groups. The Pentecostal network reaches back and forth from Latin America to the U.S.A. and Canada. It embraces Catholics and Protestants almost interchangeably. After the beginnings of the movement at Cochabamba (Bolivia) and Lima, MacNutt and others from the charismatic movement in the U.S.A. traveled to various parts of Latin America. Leadership then passed quickly to Latin Americans. They too joined the network that expanded to include Europe and much of the Third World.

Pentecostals are world travelers but they are not, by and large, world citizens. They are widely criticized for their otherworldly spiritualism. Father Alfonso Via Reque of Cochabamba said to me:

> The world could be going to hell in a basket and these birds wouldn't notice it, much less do anything about it. When I asked a prominent charismatic about the coup in Bolivia (that of García Meza) and its bloody, terrible aftermath, the charismatic replied that the coup was a good thing. It gave Bolivia stability.(15)

Stability and peace are words frequently used by charismatics. What political involvement they enter into tends to be on the conservative side (although not to the extent of U.S. evangelicals). Thus charismatics are seen by some church administrators as "safe."

The third type of base community, the catechumenate, is a revival of one of the oldest practices of Christianity. Early Christians devised it as intense preparation and examination for baptism. The main difference is that modern participants are already baptized. In essence the catechumenate provides intensive value-education for adults.

The form varies slightly from place to place but in general follows the model developed in Spain in the last ten years. A small group of adults, usually with a priest or some other adult educator present, meets weekly for a minimum of two years. Intense instruction and commitment form the heart of the movement. "We want people to see Jesus in an adult manner and we want them to respond with a commitment. The whole point of the catechumenate is making the promise to live as a Christian with all that means for an adult," remarked Father Francisco Quijano of Mexico City.(16)

To facilitate the *compromiso* (commitment), group members begin to make themselves known little by little to other members of the group and to reflect openly on their values. This they do in view of what they have been reading together in sacred scripture and of what they have been hearing from the instructor. As time goes on, they come to a point where they challenge one another gently about apparent discrepancies between alleged values and actual behavior.

Thus far the groups are not numerous but they have been relatively effective at what they set out to accomplish. "I'd rather have one person from this program than ten charismatics," reflected Quijano. "For one thing persons from the catechumenate have a profoundly social consciousness." The catechumenate also tends to attract persons who are educated and middle-income couples. In their case the catechumenate has become a specialized *comunidad de base* for the middle class.

Functioning of Base Communities

Because the *comunidades de base* are grassroots innovations, they tend to vary from diocese to diocese and from parish to parish. But there is enough similarity among them to describe them in common terms. They are something like a regional dish that is immediately recognized as *paella* but varies from cook to cook. In many ways the modus operandi of base communities follows traditional Catholic Action models. It is only a slight exaggeration to say, as Ralph della Cava suggests, that *comunidades de base* are Catholic Action for the masses.(17)

Community leaders are the key to the continuity and dynamism of the communities. Their titles and functions vary somewhat from place to place. Some dioceses refer to community leaders as *presidentes,* those who preside over the Bible services, which are thought of as an alternative to the Mass. In the Dominican Republic the Santiago de los Caballeros diocese alone has empowered five hundred such assembly presidents. In Brazil in the late 1950s Don Angelo Rossi, one of the pioneers of the basic Christian communities, introduced the term *coordinadores* (coordinators). Several hundred coordinators assemble neighborhood or village residents at least once a week for religious instruction. They pray with the people almost daily. On Sundays and holy days they help communities to follow spiritually and collectively the liturgy that their pastor is celebrating many kilometers away in the main parish church. At various times the coordinator leads morning and evening prayers, May devotions, and the like.

Other dioceses prefer to call leaders *animadores* or *responsables,* those who made sure that everyone attends and who start the discussion on the scriptural selection and keep it moving. The group thinks of itself more in terms of a study group than an alternative to the eucharistic celebration. Leaders may also define their role as leading the group to action. In many regions base community leaders emphasize the "celebration of the Word" and call their leaders "delegates (or "ministers") of the Word," or a similar title. They lead the group by helping to explain scriptural texts and by exhorting the members to follow what are proposed as Christian values.

The number of persons who act as leaders within the base communities varies widely and has implications for the life of the group and for administrative supervision from above. In Santiago de los Caballeros one person is named president. He is trained over a number of months and is formally designated by the bishop. In other places two or three couples are elected from the group as leaders for the year and will rotate weekly to bring the group together and direct meetings.

Evolution of Base Communities and Liberation Theology

As time progresses the base community achieves more of a life of its own. At the beginning, outsiders come to a village or subneighborhood. They recruit members, set up Bible study-prayer

meetings, contribute heavily to the discussions following the scripture readings, and in general breathe life into the group. As local leadership emerges, outsiders recede further into the background, supporting by their presence the continuation of the group but contributing less to the Bible discussion or to the agenda of things to be done. Rogawski and his team, who have organized base communities in Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, Utah, and Texas, estimate that outside intervention is needed for periods ranging from a month to three months, presuming the outsiders live in the village or neighborhood. Other organizers, especially in remote areas, have stayed as long as five years.

Rather than moving from place to place, most organizers invite future community leaders to a central place where they can get to know other more advanced leaders and can receive instruction in Christian teaching, group method, and sometimes community development. Throughout Latin America training centers are springing up to furnish religious instruction that can be passed on to group members back home. Sample sermon or Bible lesson plans are gone over for trainees who can read. Those who cannot read have to rely on memory; some observers consider this a hazardous undertaking with a message as complex as that of Christianity.

The teachings that community leaders pass on are not complex statements of theologians but a series of simple stories. These stories of the life of the Jews and of the life of Jesus furnish a basis for members to reflect on their own values and the direction their lives are taking. The stories also speak to them about a sense of belonging and about caring for one another.

Every message has ideological overtones, although many bishops at Puebla tried to deny it. They were chided by Bishop Germán Schmitz of Lima: "Let him who is without ideology cast the first stone."(18) The theology of liberation frames and colors the message that many base communities receive. It undergirds the reflection in these groups as thoroughly as it did the Puebla conference.

For their part, liberation theologians often work closely with base communities and elaborate their theology while immersed in the lives of the community members.

Base communities frequently use concepts developed in liberation theology. They interpret the exodus as applying to them. They read Amos about helping the widow and the orphaned. And they reflect on Jesus as the one who came to liberate them. They are quick to catch on that liberation is more than spiritual. Often their discussion centers on not having to live in the unfavorable conditions that they once thought unchangeable. Health, education, and landownership become topics of reflection, replacing resignation and suffering, as in the past.

Perhaps more important than the use of liberation content, many base communities follow the liberation methodology: facts, reflection, action. "Such a method is dynamic; it can get its followers into trouble. But we try to teach them to reach out for the feasible. We also favor the nonviolent," commented Father Matías Mueller, a longtime advisor to base communities in Bolivia.(19)

Communities typically go through stages of evolution. At first most resources in terms of leadership and content come from outside. Then leadership emerges from within the community

and the group finds itself relatively self-sufficient, except for upgrading its rudimentary knowledge of the Bible and Christianity. Stronger communities eventually find themselves reaching out.

Political Involvement

Communities reach out in a number of ways. First they take on the task of helping to start other communities. They feel that they should share the great gifts they have received: a sense of community and a knowledge that God shares their life. This kind of reaching out assures the spread of the community movement. The significance of this dynamic process is not lost on bishops and priests who are witnessing self-stimulating growth at the grass roots, a major change in the Latin American church.
Many communities, especially those with a charismatic orientation, limit themselves to such an outreach. But other groups are developing an outreach that is social and political. They animate the village or the barrio to build a school, to repair a road, or to dig a well. Some communities act as catalysts for labor union activity or for advocacy in political systems. They become political brokers, advocates, and campaigners ("agitators," say some military governments).

Community members join or help to create other political or economic organizations, such as labor unions, cooperatives, or agrarian leagues. (Base community members were especially influential in promoting union activity in São Paulo.) To the charge that base communities are political enterprises, their promoters reply that it is true only indirectly. They argue that other bodies (unions, for example) are needed to mediate between the demands of the people and the political system. But in situations where intermediate structures are partially or fully nonoperational -- because of a repressive political environment -- church bodies, such as base communities, become the only vehicles for mediating political demands.

Although these communities were founded ostensibly for religious purposes, they can serve other ends. Moreover, some -- perhaps many -- who join grassroots Christian communities do so because the base communities are practically the only viable voluntary organization they could join. For at least some members these communities are their surrogate political party -- that is, lacking political parties or labor unions, Christians found an outlet for their political instincts or explicit political philosophies in the base communities.

At this stage the hypothesis that base communities are little but surrogate political organizations is unproven. What it would take to test the thesis convincingly would be cessation of repression. Would there still be as many members in the base communities if there were active political parties and labor unions not hamstrung by repressive governments? Those who have watched for years the development of basic Christian communities, such as Thomas Bruneau, admit that some participants join and instinctively use the communities as a surrogate political party or labor union.(20) There should be no surprise about this. Many Latin Americans are conditioned by their culture to use practically any forum for political expression. And human beings have been using religion for their own purposes since the beginning of time.

Bruneau and other observers do not attempt to estimate the number of political "operators" to be found in base communities. Instead they point out that the vast majority of persons who join these

communities are rural or urban working poor with naive, largely fatalistic, conceptions of politics. Indeed it was the prevalence of apathy in Brazil that led Paulo Freire to develop his philosophy and method of conscientization.

Base communities serve an important indirect political end: they are developing a whole generation of Latin Americans in leadership skills. These skills can be transferred, for the most part, to other spheres. Thus the ability to think on one's feet, to lead discussions, to take positions and defend them, to attempt community problem-solving, to act as advocates or mediators, or to administer larger social units than the family -- all these are skills that can be applied directly in the political arena. The existence of such resources on a widespread basis means a new day dawning for the church.

The workings of base communities and their convergence with liberation theology and with political activity has been witnessed by James Pitt at São Mateus, Brazil:

> The theme of that fortnight was "that Jesus was born poor and humble and shares our life," and the question was "Why?" The eight women present were all poor. None had much formal education. Most were migrants from rural areas. All knew real hardship. They could easily identify with a poor family on the move whose baby had been born in a stable. Indeed a one-minute reading of Luke's account of the nativity provoked a one-hour discussion of the injustices, humiliations, and hardships that the mothers themselves experienced.
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> They discussed the terrible health services available in the area and how a local woman's baby had been born while she was waiting in queue to see the doctor. (The baby died.) They swapped accounts of having to wait in shops while better dressed people were served first and how as domestic servants they were treated without respect by their mistresses. They talked of the high cost of food in the local shops.
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> After an hour the catechist put the question, "Why did Jesus choose to be born poor and humble?" "Maybe," said one woman, a mother of ten of whom three had died and only two were working, "maybe it was to show these rich people that we are important too..."
>
> A ripple of excitement went through the room. Was God really making such a clear statement about *their* humanity? About *their* rights as [persons]? The discussion progressed, but with an electric charge in the air. Half an hour later, a young woman said: "I think we still haven't got the right answer to the first question." A complete hush. "I think," she went on, "that God chose his son to be born like the rest of us so that *we* can realize that we are important."(21)

The woman went on to discuss overcharging in grocery stores and how they would link up with other catechetics groups and base Christian communities around their part of town to organize a boycott of the stores. Base communities turn to political action only on occasion. For the most part these activities would be considered legitimate in a democratic society. Typically they comprise putting pressure on authorities to respond to their demands.

These demands are for basic services, such as mail, water, sewage, schools -- services typically found in middle-class neighborhoods. Base communities are a threat to authorities not because violence is likely to erupt but because their demands are put to a system that prefers to keep the poor on the margin of society. Community members seldom have title to the land on which they live. Hence they are not fully enfranchised in the political system.

The Issue of Land Tenure

One of the most threatening of all demands placed on governments by community members is the issue of land. Land tenure holds the key to explaining many of the problems of Latin America and is inextricably woven into the types of disputes that base community members "cause." There are four patterns of conflict over land tenure. First, rural families, as in Brazil, have worked a plot of land for decades or centuries without having to concern themselves with land titles. Their claim can be regarded as undocumented and therefore questionable. When corporations seek large plots of land for mass cultivation, governments eager for agribusiness begin putting these families off the land. In most cases they head for the *favelas* in São Paulo or some other large city. In other cases they resist successfully. In Brazil the church has actively supported the rural poor by means of agrarian leagues, advocacy before the government, or publicizing outrageous situations to larger audiences in order to gain public support. However, the government usually has the upper hand: it is relatively impervious to public opinion (not having been elected) and the site of the conflict is so far away that few justice and peace commissions of church authorities can follow what is going on.

Secondly, some rural families, as in Paraguay, hope to gain title to land by reason of recent colonization projects. A number of them have joined colonization projects through Christian agrarian leagues. The church through the Committee for Rural Pastoral Ministry of the Paraguayan Bishops' Conference and the bishop of Coronel Oviedo attempted to act as agents for the families relocated in colonies. Despite the intervention of the church, there has been harassment by government forces.

Thirdly, some rural families live and work on *latifundia,* huge landed estates, as sharecroppers. Typically they have lived on the same land for decades, in many cases for centuries before the Spanish conquest. Especially in view of the shrinking number of available sites and rising populations, they wish to gain title to the plots they have been working within *latifundia.* Base communities, together with other organizations, have campaigned for this type of land reform. The church has actively promoted land reform and, consistent with its social teaching, has argued the social function of private property. "There is an imperious need for real agrarian and urban reforms," said the bishops at Puebla. "Nor can anyone deny the concentration of power in the hands of civilian and military bureaucracies, which frustrate rightful claims for participation and guarantees in a democratic state."(22) The bishops see clearly the connection between lack of reform and the authoritarian political environment.

Fourthly, forced off the land, rural families migrate to large cities. In places such as Lima or São Paulo recent emigrants periodically gather together and move in on plots of land on the outskirts of the city. They have no other place to claim. They act as squatters, beginning as soon as possible

to construct a hovel. Little by little governments have come to accept such invasions or they have created *pueblos jovenes,* "new communities," often at some distance from the inner city. These practices relieve pressures put on the central government by enormous numbers of homeless persons. Squatters, however, find land titles elusive despite government assurances. Base communities get involved in attempts to obtain land titles through barrio associations or through the mediation of their pastors or bishops.

In the four patterns of conflict over land, the church sees merit in the arguments of *campesinos* and slum-dwellers. But governments and the military are ready to put down such arguments as Marxist-inspired. At the very least the base communities and their efforts at land reform are seen as troublesome, indeed dangerous to stability and order. Christian agrarian leagues are closely observed by security forces. Military and paramilitary forces not only monitor their activities but also jail, torture, and cause the disappearance of thousands who have been active in agrarian leagues or land reform efforts. The conflict between the theology of liberation and the ideology of national security is not fought out on game boards but in the lives of thousands of lay and clerical Christians, many of them members of grassroots Christian communities. The church is paying a high price to become itself.

Assessment

The Vatican quickly took notice of the rapid spread of base communities and their potential for bringing disintegration to an organization that was already structurally weak. After 1972 some Vatican officials and executives and staff at CELAM headquarters began a closer scrutiny of what was taking place.

In the period before Archbishop Alfonso López Trujillo and his conservative staff moved into CELAM headquarters in Bogotá in 1972, church leaders regarded base communities as one of the model embodiments of what the Latin American church had been struggling to achieve: *pastoral de conjunto,* active involvement of the laity in the church. Such a goal seemed only remotely attainable in a culture presumed to be ingrained with passivity, traditionalism, and fatalism. The *comunidades de base* somehow made pastoral goals come to life. The CELAM conference at Medellín approved of the existence of the base communities and hoped that the enterprise would prosper throughout the continent. On their return from the Medellín conference, CELAM staff set about facilitating the development of base communities through courses and publications. There was a willingness in many places to let the groups flourish.

Growth of the communities continued like mushrooms in a rain forest. But the dangers of uncontrolled growth are evident to anyone who has speculated about or become involved in organizational analysis. The most immediate danger is the potential for political manipulation and organizational disintegration. Other dangers are fundamentalism ("enthusiasm without substance" is one definition), dismantlement of the parish structure (something that took centuries to establish), and trusteeism (loss of control to a group of individuals on the local level).

To offset the dangers of political activism among some base communities, López Trujillo and his CELAM staff sought to give a spiritualizing interpretation to the concepts of liberation and

church. Key Vatican administrators, such as Archbishop Jerome Hamer, former subsecretary for the Congregation on Doctrine, favored that line of traditional interpretation. That interpretation did not have to be "forced"; it simply continued the spiritualizing position that traditional Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars took when they interpreted such biblical themes as liberation, poverty, and politics.

By early 1979, with the Puebla conference imminent, the lines of conflict over the base communities were drawn. López Trujillo and others in the Vatican or Latin America thought the base communities should be reined in. Many others took a more moderate stand, arguing only that it was time to scrutinize and evaluate base communities in terms of what they meant for the future of the church.

The Puebla commission dealing with base communities was loaded with Vatican and Latin American conservatives. But the tactic produced embarrassment as draft after draft of the commission was sent back by the plenary group for revision. "The drafts made weak statements about a dynamic reality. They were bound to be rejected by any person who knew what was happening at the grassroots," said Father William Saelman, a Dutch missionary-observer.(23) In the waning days of the conference Bishop Roger Aubry of Bolivia recast the document into a statement about *comunidades eclesiales de base* that proved acceptable to the larger assembly.

So important had the communities become in the bishops' assessment that *comunidades de base* were stressed in several parts of the final document, not only in the section on local church organization. The Puebla assessment of the communities reflects a gain in organizational sophistication over the uncritical praise bestowed at Medellín. The bishops at Puebla recognized base communities as an excellent Latin American adaptation of ideas expressed at Vatican II and as "the hope of the church," but they also acknowledged that the communities could lead to organizational and theological crises. The delegates acknowledged dangers of "organizational anarchy or narrow-minded elitism."(24) The base communities would have to fit in with the larger church if there was to be organizational unity. The danger was recognized without panic. The base communities would go on. But questions of organizational authority remained.

A vexing theological question arose at Puebla from theological formulations or intuitions about community. In the years preceding the Puebla conference the idea of *Iglesia popular* (people's church) had grown in popularity. Proponents of base communities were increasingly promoting the concept of the church as arising from the people. Some proponents would have liked to distance themselves from a historical church that at times embarrassed them with its traditional structures and practices. It took some doing for the unwieldy group of 190 bishops to agree on a statement in which the idea was affirmed but also qualified. Yes, the "church . . . is trying to incarnate itself in the ranks of the common people on our continent, and that therefore arises out of their response in faith to the Lord."(25) But they found the appellation "people's church" unfortunate if it was posed against the institutional church. An important conflict over language was probably avoided, but organizational questions of dispersal and unity, autonomy and centrality, remained.

Enthusiasm for base communities has spread to other parts of the world. When a journalist at

Puebla asked Archbishop John Quinn, then president of the U.S. Catholic conference, what key ideas he would take back from the Puebla conference, he said: "Two different issues: multinational corporations and base Christian communities."(26) Within a few months Archbishop Quinn described the issues to U.S. bishops assembled at their semi-annual conference. He received a long ovation.

Some observers doubt the Latin American innovation will export successfully without modification. Even Leo Mahon, one of the pioneers of base communities in Latin America, is not replicating the idea in his new assignment, a large working-class parish in Chicago. "Education is the place to start, not groupings," he reflected.(27) Others disagree. "It is simply too soon to say whether base communities will work on a widespread basis in the U.S.A. or elsewhere," says Rogawski. "We have been helping over ten years to establish base communities in various places in the U.S.A. and I can tell you the idea works among the Spanish-speaking."(28)

In some ways base communities appeal more to Protestants than to Catholics in the U.S.A. References to base communities are now so numerous in Protestant journals that it is no longer necessary to explain what the term means. This is probably because the base community model resembles the historical Protestant model of a congregational church. Professor Peter Kjeseth has said, "The base community vividly updates what we were about before we got into the business of immense suburban church congregations or millions of viewers of the electronic church. Scale of organization and definition of roles will become key issues in the future."(29) The next chapter will further delineate issues of organizational structures and role definitions as the question of the emergence of the laity is gone into.

The Latin American creation of basic Christian communities marks a major achievement. Many of the factors affecting the life of the church in Latin America converge in its genesis: methodologies developed in Catholic Action and liberation theology, pentecostal and Evangelical emphasis on prayer and small communities, the priority of working with the poor promoted by intellectual and pastoral leadership groups, and emphasis on personal commitment and on building up the world stressed by the bishops at Vatican II. The bishops at Puebla saw the communities as "the hope of the future." The communities are ecclesiogenesis, the church being born, the church becoming itself.

Notes

1. Puebla, *Final Document,* §629.

2. A growing body of literature about *comunidades eclesiales de base* has developed. Among the more useful works are *Basic Christian Communities,* LADOC (Latin American Documentation) Keyhole Series, no. 14 (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1976); *Basic Communities in the Church* (Brussels: Pro Mundi Vita, 1976); Thomas C. Bruneau, "The Catholic Church and Development in Latin America," *World Development*, vol. 8, nos. 7 and 8 (July-Aug. 1980), pp. 535-44, and "Basic Christian Communities in Latin America: Their Nature and Significance (especially in Brazil)," in Daniel H. Levine, ed., *Churches and Politics in Latin America* (Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage, 1981), pp. 225-37; Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., *The Challenge.* See

also a lengthy series of manuals and expositions of aspects of base Christian communities written by José Marins and a team of experts and published by Ediciones Paulinas, Bogotá; also, CELAM, *Comunidades cristianas de base* (Bogotá: Indo-American Press, 1970); Patricia Van Dorp and Heriberto Berger, *Comunidades cristianas de base: estudio teológico y sociológico* (Santiago: Centro Bellarmino, 1972); René Laurentin, *L Amérique latine: A l'heure de l'enfantement* (Paris: Seuil,1968), chaps. 4, 10, and 12.

3. Alfredo Kunz, "A BCC in a Rural Setting," LADOC, *Basic Christian Communities,* pp. 32-34.

4. José Marins, "Basic Christian Communities in Latin America," LADOC, *Basic Christian Communities*, pp. 1-12.

5. Dom Aldo Gerna, "How Our BCC Evolved," LADOC, *Basic Christian Communities*, pp. 13-16.

6. Francisco Bravo, *The Parish of San Miguelito in Panama* (Cuernavaca: Centro Intercultural de Documentación, 1966).

7. Interview, June 7, 1979.

8. Interview, June 6, 1979.

9. Ibid.

10. Interview, June 6, 1979; see also his "Basic Christian Communities," LADOC, *Basic Christian Communities*, p. 7.

11. Interview, Jan. 28, 1979.

12. Cornelia Butler Flora furnishes a bibliography on pentecostalism with special reference to Latin America in *Pentecostalism in Latin America* (Rutherford, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976), pp. 269-73. See also Flavio Siebeneichler, *Catolicismo popularPentecostismo -- Kirche: Religion in Lateinamerika* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1976).

13. Interviews, Puebla, Jan. 28 to Feb. 13, 1979.

14. Interview, May 12, 1976.

15. Interview, Feb. 10, 1980.

16. Interview, Nov. 5, 1979.

17. Interview, March 20, 1980.

18. Plenary session, Puebla General Conference, Feb. 7, 1979.

19. Interview, June 28, 1979.

20. Symposium on New Strategy for Catholic Church Entry into Latin American Society, Latin American Studies Association Eighth National Meeting, Pittsburgh, April 6, 1979; Session on Conflict of Loyalty: Political Polarization in the Catholic Church in Latin America, Latin American Studies Association Ninth National Meeting, Bloomington, Ind., Oct. 19, 1980. See also Gerardo Viviers, "Christian Political Witness of the Church of the Poor: A Study of the Political Ecclesiology of CEBs in Brazil," Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1983.

21. *LADOC*, 10, 5 (May/June 1980) 12.

22. Puebla, *Final Document*, § 1263.

23. Interview, Feb. 10, 1979.

24. Puebla, *Final Document,* §361.

25. Ibid., §263.

26. Informal press conference, Puebla, Feb. 2, 1979.

27. Interview, Dec. 6, 1980.

28. Interview, June 7, 1980

29. Wartburg Theological Seminary seminar, Feb. 28, 1979.