

SEMINAR PAPER

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AT PUEBLA: THE WOMEN'S PROJECT AT CELAM III

The Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM III) that concluded on February 12 in Puebla, Mexico, was the subject of intense behind-the-scenes struggle by many groups that represent the conflicts that divide Latin American society. The particular stance that might be taken by the bishops on such issues as poverty, capitalism and Marxism, political repression and national security states was not just a matter of concerns to nuns, priests, pastoral workers and theologians. Political, military and business leaders also were concerned. The Church in Latin America today often stands as the only autonomous institution capable of mounting protest against fascist regimes or providing a base for dissenting organizing and communication. The government of the United States was also concerned. While CELAM III was in session, the Mexico City paper, *Excelsior*, reported that Senator Frank Church's committee had heard testimony that President Carter had ordered the CIA to mount a special surveillance of activist Latin America priests and nuns "lest he be confronted with another Iran-type situation."

The story of Puebla, the manipulation of its processes by the crafty Lopez Trujillo, secretary of CELAM, the mobilization of popular response to this, the results of the final document: all this will be told many times. In this essay I wish to focus on a particular aspect of the popular response, its work at Puebla and its effects on the participants and on the final document. This is the Project of Women or *Mujeres para el Dialogo*. This project was sponsored by CIDHAL, a documentation and communication center on women in Latin American society, based in Cuernavaca, Mexico. CIDHAL was founded in the mid-60's by the indomitable Betzie Hollants, a Belgian lay-woman, now in her seventies, who was formerly an associate of Ivan Illich and of CIDOC. It has the warm support of the socialist Bishop of Cuernavaca, Mendez Arceo. For some twelve years it has sought to deepen the awareness of the women's issue in both the Church and society in the context of the struggle for liberation.

When the Preparatory Document for CELAM III was issued in December of 1977, it was evident that little attention was to be paid to women. The whole conference was being manipulated by Bishop Lopez Trujillo to prevent input by liberation theologians and to keep radical bishops from attending. A conservative stance toward women is a part of the baggage of Latin American fascism with its emphasis on family and property. The use of upper-class women in the coup against Allende in 1973 should not be forgotten.

But theologians of liberation (with the exception of a few who have worked with feminists in the United States, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez

and Sergio Torres) are equally likely to overlook women. The Medellín document, issued from CELAM II ten years ago, said nothing about women. The Preparatory Document for Puebla at least recognized that women were an important issue and congratulated itself for noticing this, in contrast to Medellín, but had nothing much to say on the subject. It was evident that concerted efforts must be made if this issue was to be given proper attention at all.

In the Summer and Fall of 1978, CIDHAL laid plans for a major convocation of women from Latin and North America. There would be representatives from as many countries of Latin America as possible, including a group of women that came particularly to bring documentation on women's experience of political repression. There would be North American feminists, among them theologians, seminarians, ordained Protestant women and Catholic pastoral workers. Representatives from NETWORK, the lobby of women religious in Washington, and of the Women's Ordination Conference would be present.

There was also a group of Hispanic women that came down as a part of a group of Hispanic North Americans to protest their colonialization by the Catholic Church in the United States. This group used the CELAM conference as a forum to ask for Hispanic priests and bishops for predominantly Hispanic Catholic parishes and dioceses. The fact that the several episcopal delegates at CELAM from the North American Catholic Church included no Hispanics was a particularly flagrant example of the sort of colonialization that they wished to expose. This network of women constituted the *ad hoc* project, *Mujeres para el Dialogo*.

The *Mujeres* group was part of what might be called the popular conference at Puebla. Lopez Trujillo's efforts to seal the official conference against radicals made it very inaccessible. The bishops, together with a small number of religious delegates and a handful of lay delegates, as well as official observers and theologians (none of them from the liberation perspective), were sequestered behind the high walls of the Palafoxiano Seminary, a highly conservative seminary in the most conservative diocese of Mexico. Only those with press credentials got inside the walls. Once inside, there was access only to the press room and press conference auditorium. The official conference was still separated by a high counter and long corridor. The press conferences were highly managed. The questions were submitted in advance, and the CELAM Secretariat selected the bishop who would answer the question.

In contrast to this rigid situation, there gathered downtown the popular conference, where CENCOS, a Mexico City-based information center, provided a daily forum for liberation theologians, sociologists and economists on the Left, radical bishops and resistance leaders, such as Nicaragua's priest-poet guerrilla, Ernesto Cardinal. Some two thousand reporters were covering the conference, and many of them jammed into the CENCOS press conferences that provided a free-wheeling discussion of the issues. The suppression of open discussion at

the seminary made the reporters all the more eager for the substantive analysis available through CENCOS and other such groups.

Contrary to reports, circulated in rightist Mexican press and repeated in North American papers, of "rebellious priests" meeting in a "counter-conference," this popular conference had no purpose except to try to establish lines of communication with progressive forces in the official conference in order to assure that the liberation perspective was not sold out.

The *Mujeres* group came to Puebla with a well-planned agenda. They held a seminar in Spanish on five successive mornings. Each seminar provided three or four presentations on a particular topic: (1) the socio-economic status of women in Latin American society; (2) sexuality, the family and the Church; (3) the religious woman; (4) women and ministry; and (5) feminism and liberation theology. In addition, theologian Rosemary Ruether, together with a group of seminarians and women in ministry, provided afternoon sessions on feminism and liberation theology in English. The topics discussed in this seminar were (1) feminism and Christology; (2) ministry and ecclesiology; (3) the paternity of God and creation; and (4) feminism and liberation theology. These meetings were increasingly attended by reporters and male liberation theologians. The *Mujeres* group wished to make their presence and message known to the religious media and to theologians, as well as to bishops.

Mujeres also came armed with folders containing a number of key articles on feminist theological and social analysis in Spanish (some translated from North American feminists). They attempted to establish one-to-one relations with progressive bishops and to give these folders to each one personally. Toward the end of the conference, a *Schema* was drawn up by the group summarizing the whole perspective provided by the women's project, its theological and sociological analysis. This *Schema* was distributed both to bishops and to theologians of liberation.

Efforts were made to establish an internal caucus of bishops and other official delegates, especially some of the few women delegates (mostly religious) inside the conference and to meet with them to discuss the women's issues. But they were not successful in this. They did succeed in meeting a certain number of such bishops and women religious individually. These were the liason persons who they hoped would carry the message of the *Mujeres* project to the delegates assembled each day inside the seminary to work on the reports of the twenty-one commissions. From the reports of these commissions would come the final document of the conference.

The efforts to communicate with the women delegates was disappointing. Very few had even what might be called a proto-feminist consciousness. Most saw themselves as delegates of CLAR (the organization of Latin American religious, male and female) rather than representing women. CLAR attempted to get some of its members on every commission; it made no effort to spread the women around, but clustered most of them on the commission on religious life. The women

themselves seemed to have little sensitivity to their own need to be broadly represented on the various commissions. More help in inserting the concerns of *Mujeres* probably came from the progressive bishops.

The results of these efforts were not fruitless, although not as extensive as might have been hoped. From the beginning, *Mujeres* had no illusions about the difficulties of inserting feminist liberation perspectives into the official document! Several commissions where they hoped to make an impact said nothing about women. The first section on the historical and social reality of Latin America contains a powerful description of the faces of the many classes of poor and oppressed people who call out for a hearing in Latin America. Even the elderly and children are listed among these imploring faces, but women are ignored. The document opens with a triumphalistic statement about the history of evangelization in Latin America, which throws in a paternalistic remark about the essential role played by women in this history "through their prayer and self-denial" (I, 3). The commission on the family is predictably traditionalist, with condemnations of artificial birth control and abortion.

The only really significant statement on women occurs in the commission on the laity (XII, 32-39). This section speaks of the oppression and exploitation of women in many areas. It begins by mentioning the traditional marginalization of women by economic and cultural structures (*machismo*, unequal salaries), resulting in the almost total absence of women from political, economic and cultural life. It goes on to note that new forms of marginalization arise in consumer society that uses woman as an object of commercialization, masking her exploitation under the cover of progress. It talks of the connection between increased female prostitution and oppressive economic conditions. The laws intended to protect women are unenforced or evaded. Women seldom have workers' organizations to protect their rights. Women carry the double burden of jobs and domestic labor, often having to assume alone the full economic support of the family. The exploitation of women as domestic servants is also mentioned.

The document then goes on to affirm the equality and dignity of women in the Gospel perspective. Woman is man's coequal in the image of God and co-creator with him in continuing the work of creation. Woman is in no way second in the order of creation, but equal partner. In the New Testament women share equally in the prophetic gifts. They are represented by the women who understood Christ's message, such as the Samaritan woman; the women who followed Christ, who remained faithful at the cross, and who were sent to the apostles by the Lord to announce his resurrection. They were also present in the women of the early Christian communities and especially in Mary, who announced the liberation of the children of God in the *Magnificat*.

The document also affirms the need to use women's abilities more fully in the ministry and mission of the Church without, however, including ordination. Women are called to participate in pastoral planning and catechesis as lay persons and also in new non-ordained minis-

tries. This area is particularly important both for women and for the Latin American church. Due to the lack of sufficient ordained priests, many Latin America Catholics, especially the poor, have led a sub-ecclesial life. They have been baptized, but often not married in the Church. They seldom receive the other sacraments. In order to deepen its evangelization (evangelization in Latin Catholicism means the deepening of knowledge and commitment to the faith for those already baptized, not, as in the Protestant context, "conversion") the Church has come to rely more and more on *comunidades de base*.

These base communities are Christian cell groups of perhaps fifteen people who engage in Bible study, worship and pastoral action. They have become a key element in the action-reflection model of theology, carried out by the people themselves, that has been promoted by liberation theologians. Many of these groups have been drawn into social action on behalf of the rights of workers and peasants. Unlike North American house-churches, which tend to exist among the educated middle classes of Christians, Latin base communities are found among peasants, workers, Indians and marginalized peoples in the urban slums. Radical priests working with the poor have used such communities as the key tool of their organizing in the barrios.

The position taken on base communities was one of the key areas of conflict at CELAM III. Lopez Trujillo barely mentioned them in his preparatory document. The chief concern of conservatives was the lay and leftist character of these communities. As lay-led communities, they represent the potential for an entirely different concept of the Church, democratic and congregational, rather than hierarchical and clerical. The Vatican delegates also were concerned about this threat and loaded themselves in excessive number on to the commission on base communities.

Theologians of liberation, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, concentrated much of their energies in mediating with progressive bishops to counteract this conservative influence. The result was a generally hearty endorsement of base communities. They are said to be the "hope and joy of the Church." Although the bishops see them as a substructure under the parish and hence under the bishops, their freedom is not curtailed. Rather, they are endorsed not only as the key to evangelization in Latin America, but also the base for building the new social order on behalf of the poor that the document envisions as the goal of the Church's mission in Latin America.

When the authors of the document speak of promoting new ministries for women, they have in mind particularly the leadership of such base communities. This is no small matter. Some 80,000 of these communities are said to exist in Brazil alone. Many thousand also exist in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Among the women that gathered for the *Mujeres* project, there were several women pastors of base communities, two from Cuernavaca and one from Mexicali. Both religious and lay women are found among such leaders.

North American Catholic feminists are concerned that the effort to ordain women constitutes an endorsement of oppressive clericalism.

This new practice of women as leaders of base communities offers an important alternative. A new kind of ministry, freed of clericalism, offers entirely different opportunities for ministry to women, particularly those concerned to work among the poor. The section on women in the final document goes beyond anything said before in a Latin American episcopal document. It puts the Church on the side of the goals of secular feminism, at least as far as civil and economic rights are concerned.

The final document stresses the "preferential option for the poor" as the heart of the gospel. The Church must side with the poor, even to the extent of being persecuted by the ruling classes, because Christ came first of all to side with the poor. The Gospel demands the building of a new social order of justice that overcomes poverty and oppression. This is an essential dimension of the meaning of salvation brought by Christ, although not excluding the transcendent dimension. Salvation means both justice and immortal life. The Church can neglect neither. Although the document is at pains to insist that the transcendent dimension not be neglected, it is equally insistent that a private, spiritualistic concept of salvation is a betrayal of Christ's message. Reconciliation with God means reconciliation with one's neighbor and reconciliation with one's neighbor means a redistribution of the material resources of the earth to create a just society, the document declares (IV, 23).

A new Mariology emerges from the document, as well as from the later speeches of the Pope in Mexico, that illuminates this theme of the Gospel's preferential option for the poor. This new Mariology is based on the *Magnificat*. Mary is seen as the personification of the New Israel, the Church, specifically as representing God's poor, the oppressed and downtrodden of the earth, through whom God "puts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up those of no account."

The bishops were not always capable of grasping the radicalism of this liberation Mariology. At one point the tone shifts to a paternalistic note. Mary is said to graciously intervene in behalf of the poor and downtrodden, in the manner of a Lady Bountiful. But generally it is recognized that the *Magnificat* identified Mary herself as the representative of the oppressed who are liberated.

The document recognizes that women too are included among those oppressed who are to be liberated by Christ's preferential option for the poor. Through Mary, women, in some special way, personify the oppressed, although she represents all oppressed peoples, not just women. This liberation Mariology is perhaps one of the most important new theological themes to emerge in the Pope's speeches. The bishops follow the Pope in echoing this theme at various points in the final document.

In addition to influencing the final document, the *Mujeres* project had other purposes at Puebla. They hoped to impact the theologians of liberation who gathered unofficially to engage in the same kind of lobbying with the bishops. By presenting an impressive array of resources and seminars on feminism and the Church, they hoped to make it less easy for the theologians to ignore this issue in their subsequent work. A third purpose was to create some new network of communication between

North and Latin American feminists, including North American Hispanics.

Too often, suspicions of North American feminists characterize Latin American liberation circles. Women working in resistance to political repression regard North American feminists as bourgeois, separatist and lacking in class analysis. Often liberation theologians follow a secular Left line that feminism is a liberal middle class movement. The real issue is to liberate the poor, the worker, from economic oppression. Women should simply work along with men to liberate their people.

The perspective provided by writings from CIDHAL's Itziar Lozano attempted to show the importance of sexism as a substructure within the oppression of workers by capitalism. But a substructure that has to be dealt with in its own right. Her article, on "Women, the Key to Liberation," included in the packet to the bishops, was a succinct statement of this type of socialist feminism. The *Mujeres* project wished to induce the liberation theologians to take sexism seriously and also to clear up some of the suspicions that divided Latin and North American feminists. Several intense but constructive meetings between women from the two continents helped to clarify these tensions and lay the basis for an ongoing network of communication.

The *Mujeres* project is an important chapter in the history of the liberation "lobby" at Puebla. It is only through the efforts of this voluntary gathering of feminists, liberation theologians and sociologists that it becomes possible to understand how a conference of bishops, stacked to represent primarily a centrist and conservative position, managed, nevertheless, to come out with a document that substantially reaffirmed the central lines of the liberation perspective taken ten years ago at Medellín. Lopez Trujillo's threatened coup of the right was largely averted, although the document is much weaker than it might have been.

Nevertheless, there is no backing down on the fundamental commitment to side with the poor and to oppose the oppressive ruling classes and their international imperialist allies. Whether it is possible to actualize this commitment without engaging in conflict and without accepting a Marxist analysis is another question. At this point, the high ideals of the document must exit from the sequestered walls of the seminary and be tested in the realities of Latin American society.

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