

SEMINAR PAPER

THE GRASSROOTS CHURCH

One of the most important decisions that faced the Puebla conference concerned the question of the future of the *comunidades de base* or base communities.¹ (Puebla refers to these as *comunidades eclesiales de base* and henceforth I will use its abbreviation of CEB's.) These consisted of small groups of a few dozen members each which emphasized the active participation of all in worship, reflection and action and which created strong interpersonal bonds through a process of cooperation and sharing. This type of grassroots church had received the approbation of the Latin American bishops at Medellín in 1968,² and in the intervening decade had swelled to an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 cells, many of them in Brazil but with others scattered throughout all the nations of Latin America.

At first glance, this development appears unambiguously evangelical and salutary: who could be against the active participation of lay persons in Christian worship and action at the base and thus be against the formation of real Christian communities? The bishops, however, were faced with two major problems with regard to this model of the Church. The first concerned the relation of the CEB's to their own episcopal authority: were at least some of these communities becoming indifferent or even hostile to the hierarchy, angered at its alliance with the status quo and at its neglect of their own struggles?³ Thus there arose the spectre of "the people's church,"⁴ which, it was feared, would

¹ For background information and analyses of Puebla, I am especially indebted to two special issues on the conference: *Christus* 44 (March-April, 1979) and *Diakonia* 3 (April, 1979). Other helpful accounts include the following: G. Gutiérrez, "Pobres y liberación en Puebla," *Páginas* 21-22 (April, 1979), 1-32; S. Torres, *Puebla 1979: The Third Conference of the Latin American Bishops* (New York: Theology in the Americas, 1979); H. Cox, "A Puebla Diary," *Commonweal* 106 (March 19, 1979), 141-45; Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Church in Latin America: From Medellín to Puebla" (manuscript not yet published); and Dean Peerman, "Celam III: Measured Steps Forward," *Christian Century* 96 (April 4, 1979), 373-78. An excellent collection of the contributions of social scientists to the conference may be found in Xabier Gorostiaga, ed., *Para entender América Latina: Aporte colectivo de los científicos sociales en Puebla* (Panamá: CEASPA, 1979).

² Cf. especially section 15, no. 10: "The Christian ought to find the living of the communion, to which he has been called, in his 'base community,' that is to say, in a community, local or environmental, which corresponds to the reality of a homogeneous group and whose size allows for personal fraternal contact among its members" (*The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America II: Conclusions* [2nd ed.; Washington: Division for Latin America, U.S.C.C., n.d.], p. 201).

³ In *New York Times Magazine* (May 6, 1979), Alan Riding quotes a priest in El Salvador as evidence of this tendency: "This is truly the people's church. Puebla was important in determining whether the bishops belong to this church. The fact is, the bishops need this church. The people don't need the bishops" ("Latin Church in Siege," p. 44).

⁴ For a strong attack on this concept, cf. Bonaventure Kloppenburg, *The People's Church: A Defense of My Church* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978). The Spanish

establish itself more and more in conscious opposition to the traditional hierarchical model of diocese and parish.

A second problem arose from the external relationships of the CEB's to secular society rather than from their internal links to ecclesiastical authority. The interaction within the communities often issued in conscientization, that is, a raising of awareness concerning their situation of misery, its causes and possible remedies for their plight. Since totalitarian military regimes, based on the ideology of "national security," had seized power throughout the continent during the past two decades, and since these had managed to eliminate all other institutions of opposition or criticism, it became clear that the CEB's were embarked on a collision course with established secular authority. Added to this danger was the bishops' growing fear of the "instrumentalization" of the CEB's by Marxists or by Marxist ideas; for often the social analysis of the communities had led to the conclusion that socialism constituted the only long-range alternative to their steadily worsening situation of poverty and institutionalized oppression.

Because of these and other issues that will be discussed later, it appears that curial representatives at the conference were determined to block or to repudiate the CEB's.⁵ It is noteworthy, also, that Pope John Paul II made no reference at all to them in his opening address. On the other hand, a number of progressive bishops and their theologians, recognizing the importance of the question for the future of the Church in Latin America, decided to give highest priority to this issue in their efforts to influence the Puebla conference. At this point, I will present a synthesis of what the final document actually says about the CEB's and then discuss some of the theological issues raised by this position.⁶

First of all, references to the small communities are scattered throughout the five major parts into which the Puebla document is divided. And it is important to notice that the term *comunidades eclesiales de base* is always used instead of the familiar *comunidades de base* which had become its generally accepted designation. There can be no doubt that this was a deliberate attempt to avert the first danger mentioned above and to stress the need of incorporation of the communities into the larger structure of the *ekklesia* and its episcopal authority.

Next, although Puebla sometimes seems to want to have it both ways on other key issues, such as Christology, it certainly arrived at a

original, *Iglesia popular*, was published in 1977 and was probably intended to influence the Puebla conference.

⁵On this point, cf. Enrique Dussel and Felipe Espinosa, "Puebla: Crónica y historia," *Christus* 44 (March-April, 1979), 26. The authors name four curial representatives along with two conservative cardinals on commission 10 concerning the CEB's and ask: "Would the question of the CEB's be of such importance for high-level members of the Church?"

⁶All quotes and paragraph numbers refer to the Spanish text released at the closing of the conference: "La Evangelización en el presente y en el futuro de América Latina: III Conferencia General del Episcopado Latino americana." The translations are my own. I am indebted for a copy to Thomas Quigley of the Latin American bureau of the United States Catholic Conference.

powerful and unequivocal endorsement of the CEB's, along with notes of caution and warning concerning both of the dangers mentioned earlier. Thus, in an analysis of the ecclesial reality in Part One of the document, it is noted that the CEB's have both multiplied and matured since Medellín and that they now constitute a motive of "joy and hope for the Church." In accordance with the desires of Medellín, they are also said to have become the "focal points" of evangelization and "motivating causes (*motores*) of liberation and development" (#56). And in the very last paragraph of the lengthy document, this theme is returned to as to communities are hailed as one of "the signs of joy and hope" in the Latin American Church (#1069).

Part Three of Puebla is concerned with the various centers, agents and means of evangelization. After discussion of the family as the first of the centers, the bishops turn next to the CEB's. They are referred to as an "important ecclesial event that is particularly our own" and once again as the "hope of the church" (#477).

In this and other places, the bishops delineate the specific valuable aspects of the communities, which I will now summarize. The CEB's, they assert, contribute to a more personalized (#65; 477) or familial (#139) style of evangelization, contrasted with the increasing coldness of modern society; they lead to a more profound understanding of the Word of God and participation in the Eucharist (#488); they promote both self-examination as well as reflection on the social reality (#477); and they foster active commitment to the new commandment of love (#488), to the struggle for justice (#488) and to the construction of a new society (#490). Also a great value, it is stressed, are their close links with the family, the world of the workers, the neighborhood and the local community. Finally, they have been successful in fostering vocations (#664), have encouraged the emergence of new types of lay ministry (#57; 71; 477) and have developed a very effective style of catechesis for simple people, both the young and adults (#477).

On the negative side of the ledger, the bishops include warnings concerning the dangers mentioned earlier. The link with the authority of the larger Church is stressed as an absolute necessity to avoid anarchy, closed elitism (#160) or degeneration into self-sufficient sects (#161). There is a sharp rejection of the notion of a "people's church" as opposed to an "institutional church," and strong insistence on the fact that the entire Church is called into being "from above," that is, from the initiative of the Lord.⁷ The bishops also warn of attempts to manipulate or instrumentalize the CEB's (#58) and caution lay pastoral leaders against using their authority for partisan or ideological purposes (#392).

⁷Dussell and Espinosa conclude from this section: "The 'popular church' now has a green light, if it is understood as becoming incarnate in the popular classes" ("Puebla," p. 35). They also note concerning the opponents of the people's church: "As the saying goes, they came for wool—and left sheared." As regards the notion of opposition, José I. González Faus observes wryly that it would be just as ridiculous to speak of an institutional church as opposed to the people, in "Terminos discutidos en Puebla," *Christus* 44 (March-April, 1979), 64.

Lastly, they appear to prefer permanent deacons—still few in number—rather than lay persons as leaders of the communities (#69).

Along with these caveats, however, some places (not named) are chided for giving insufficient attention to the formation of CEB's (#58). The document stresses that evangelization in the future "will recognize the validity of the experience of the CEB's and will encourage their development in union with their pastors" (#90). And when mapping out key pastoral strategy, the bishops strongly emphasize their own desire to "promote, orient and accompany" the CEB's as well as to discover and train leaders for them, especially in the large cities (#496).

At this point, there is a last statement by the bishops that may serve as a bridge to discussion concerning the theological implications of Puebla. In a continent long served by missionaries (which they acknowledge gratefully), the bishops are also aware of their own missionary vocation to other lands outside Latin America "from our poverty," as they put it. Thus, they assert their belief that "our churches can offer something original and important to all" and that included in this contribution are "the experiences of the small ecclesial communities" (#253). In a spirit of response to this missionary initiative, let us turn to some of the theological issues raised by the document.

First, let me voice my own suspicion concerning the opposition to the CEB's that has been reported as issuing from the Roman curia. As we all know, the officials of that body are habituated to "think in centuries"; even if we lapse into decades, however, it is clear that the CEB's before long will bring to a boil two neuralgic intra-ecclesial issues: the ordination of married men and the ordination of women, married or otherwise. Why do I say this? Because there is absolutely no possibility that our present male, celibate priests will be able to staff or even to visit all of the CEB's, either now or in the future. And if we recall the ancient theological principle of *sacramenta propter homines* ("the sacraments exist for the sake of human beings"), it is clear that the Church will soon be in the perilous position of barring millions of committed Catholics from the primary font of Christian spirituality, the Eucharist, unless it ordains the present and future leaders of the CEB's, the vast majority of whom are married men or women. My own speculation, then, is that the ordination issues so much discussed in the United States will be solved in Latin America before they reach a resolution in the rest of the Church.

Secondly, it should be admitted that the cautions of the bishops about preserving ecclesial unity and the danger of ideologization are certainly correct and would be accepted by any sane theologian. Clearly the Church must always work toward (not prematurely announce) real unity in the faith and must preserve its own independent sphere of freedom. But it should be added that the bishops, too, can fall into these same traps: against unity through abuse of episcopal power or falling into ideologization through failure to recognize clearly their own ideologies. It is reported that Bishop Germán Schmitz of Peru drew one of the few outbursts of applause during the conference when he re-

marked pointedly: "Let him who is without ideology cast the first stone."⁸

Next I would like to turn to an evaluation of Puebla's approach to liberation theology and its relationship to the CEB's. This is clearly an issue that dominated early press reports, in my view on a very superficial level. The important feature of Puebla is that in the doctrinal sections it repeats some very traditional and certainly true dogmas, remaining on a rather abstract plane. But in the longer and more important pastoral sections, it actually utilizes the *method* of liberation theology and utilizes in some way every important feature of its *content*. This to me is more important than the oft-noted fact that variations of the word "liberation" occur hundreds of times in the text, since this by itself could be a strategy of cooptation. Thus, while rejecting an explicit endorsement of liberation theology that had appeared in one of the drafts, the bishops in fact gave it the highest endorsement possible by embracing it as their operative theological approach.⁹

If we recall, then, what is now a commonplace in Latin American theology, that the *practice* of liberation is more important than the *theology* of liberation, we can perceive the applicability of all this to the CEB's. The point has been made succinctly by Bishop Waldyr Calheiros of Volta Redonda: "The *comunidades* are the theology of liberation put into practice."¹⁰ Thus, the adoption in practice of a liberation theology plus the endorsement of a mechanism for *living* it at the very grassroots of the Church are the most important achievements of Puebla, in my opinion.

The question arises, then, are the CEB's a useful model for the Church in the United States? Rosemary Ruether has suggested that they "might signify an alternative ecclesiology that is egalitarian rather than clerical."¹¹ Aside from the fact that the word "egalitarian" does not seem calculated to win much support at present, my own preference would be to recommend a dialectical model, where both base (the people) the superstructure (the hierarchy) share and learn from each other, while preserving their distinctive modes of service. By way of digression, the members of the CEB's might be able from their experience of struggle to point out the most serious weakness of the Puebla documents: the illusion that one can struggle for justice for the poor without some ideology. To be blunt, the claim to be above all ideologies is, ironically, the most flagrant ideology of the documents, which are

⁸This is recorded by Jon Sobrino in "Puebla: Serena afirmación de Medellín," *Diakonia* 3 (April, 1979), 39.

⁹The attitude of Pope John Paul II on liberation theology may be gleaned from the unambiguous remarks he made soon after the conference: "The theology of liberation holds not only that men and women should be instructed in the word of God, but also that they should be instructed concerning their social, political and economic rights. The theology of liberation is sometimes exclusively referred to Latin America, but we must recognize also . . . the demands of a theology of liberation for the whole world" (Dussell and Espinosa, "Puebla," p. 26). The reference given is to the Mexican newspaper, *Uno más uno* (February 22, 1979), p. 11.

¹⁰Quoted in "The Church of the Poor," *Time* (May 7, 1979), 88.

¹¹Ruether, "The Church in Latin America," p. 19.

filled with other ideologies, mostly borrowed unacknowledged from secular sources. It seems to me a very important service of theologians to keep pointing this out.¹²

But to return to the original question on the applicability of the CEB's, my initial response is that we have them here in this country already. My own priestly ministry for almost two decades has been entirely with them: transient communities of students and the more permanent groups that flourish in the city of Syracuse, built around service to the poor, the handicapped, prisoners, alcoholics and so forth. Perhaps as a Church we could encourage these communities more or at least acknowledge their profoundly evangelical witness. As regards the applicability of the CEB's to the parish structure, I would leave that decision to those who have more knowledge and experience in the parochial area.

As a final note, it is important to stress the fact that the CEB's constitute the mechanism for putting into practice Puebla's unambiguous and, it seems, irrevocable commitment to the poor and their cause (which, incidentally, Gustavo Gutiérrez has been trying to tell us for years is the linchpin of liberation theology). It may be recalled also that Latin America at present comprises half of the Church and, considering birth rates, will soon be an increasing majority. Thus there looms before us the gigantic question mark that Puebla poses to the Church in the developed nations: what is our commitment as regards the cause of the poor? Honesty forces us to admit that if our position is different than that of Puebla on such an important, life or death issue for millions, then we would have to acknowledge a de facto schism within our Catholic community. And—a spectre to haunt one's dreams—that we in the West would be the ones that constitute the schismatic minority.

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¹²This point is argued very strongly by F. Betto in "Tendencias políticas en Puebla," *Christus* 44 (March-April, 1979), 56-67.