

## THE *SENSUS FIDEI* IN THE RECENT HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH

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In this reflection about theology, local churches and the *sensus fidei*, I would like to begin by quoting the recent document of the International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei* in the life of the Church,” of 2014. This paragraph treats the relationship between the *sensus fidei* and theology:

As a service towards the understanding of faith, theology endeavors, amid the *conspiratio* of all the charismas and functions in the Church, to provide the Church with objective precision regarding the content of its faith, and it necessarily relies on the existence and correct exercise of the *sensus fidelium*. The latter is not just an object of attention for theologians; it constitutes a foundation and a locus for their work. Theology itself, therefore, has a two-fold relationship to the *sensus fidelium*. On the one hand, theologians depend on the *sensus fidei* because the faith that they study and articulate lives in the people of God. In this sense, theology must place itself in the school of the *sensus fidelium* to discover there the profound resonances of the word of God. On the other hand, theologians help the faithful to express the authentic *sensus fidelium* by reminding them of the essential lines of faith, and helping them to avoid deviations and confusion caused by the influence of imaginative elements from elsewhere (n. 81).<sup>1</sup>

In this paragraph, the *sensus fidei* and the *sensus fidelium* are identified with that sense, that “feeling” that springs from faith, and is related to everything that affects the life of faith and faith experience. Its major source is the Holy Spirit, who allows every faithful person to “feel” and develop an intuitive evaluation of the central contents of faith. The method to attain that “sense” of faith is not rationally deductive nor grounded in formal arguments, but consists of an experience through which we can recognize and discern what does and what does not belong effectively to faith.<sup>2</sup>

Different from Theology, which is the “science of faith,” the *sensus fidei*” is not a reflected knowledge of the mysteries of faith, and does not develop concepts, nor uses rational methods. It is a *sensus*, similar to a vital instinct that causes attachment to the truth and rejection of what contradicts it. As Pope Francis says in the *Evangelii*

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<sup>1</sup> International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* 2014, available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html) (accessed on July 1, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See W. Kern - F.-J. Niemann, *El conocimiento teológico*, Herder, Barcelona 1986, 229; apud Joaquín Silva, *El carácter vinculante del *sensus fidei* en la vida de la Iglesia*, Presentation in the Seminario de Profesores de la Facultad de Teología, May 26, 2015.

*Gaudium*, “The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom, which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression” (n.119).

As we see, in spite of not being a science and not expressing itself by rational arguments, the *sensus fidei* can be and in fact has been an important source of inspiration to theology and in particular pastoral theology, the same as to the whole life of the Church. In this text, we will take into consideration and into account this intimate relationship, so desirable and accurate, between *sensus fidei* and theology, and will reflect on it in light of the experience of the Latin American Church.

We will reflect upon the recent experience of Latin American Theology of putting itself in “the school of the *sensus fidelium* to discover there the profound resonances of the word of God.”<sup>3</sup> I will take three landmarks in the recent path of Latin American Church during the 70s and 80s, which provide—in my judgment—examples of our local Church. These landmarks first presented themselves in the community of the faithful, and were later assimilated not only by the hierarchy and the magisterium but also by theologians in their reflections. As I describe them, I will try to comment on and highlight how they became theology.

They are:

1. Liberation Theology and the Option for the Poor.
2. The popular reading of the Bible.
3. The interaction between women theologians and women from the grassroots communities.

At the end I hope to have demonstrated that the *sensus fidei* was not only very important to the Latin American Church, but that it molded and configured that Church, bringing to fuller, consistent expression the face it has today. In spite of all the difficulties and pressures suffered during the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the [false] utopias, the closeness between theology and the *sensus fidelium* remains a powerful element in the configuration of Church life at the southern part of America.

### ***Liberation Theology and the Option for the Poor***<sup>4</sup>

The topic of human rights, associated with the global effort to confront poverty, emerged emphatically after World War II, especially in the northern hemisphere and in international organizations like the UN. Within the UN, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) was founded in 1945, with the aim of ensuring stable food supplies and nutrition, especially in the poor countries. “Before, poverty and hunger were problems more or less spread everywhere. But today they are serious problems, concentrated in particular parts of the world, to the extent that these regions form, alongside the countries of the capitalist West and the communist East an underdeveloped Third World, to use the term coined by the French geographer Alfred

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<sup>3</sup> In that first section the author relies on material from the the Duffy Lectures, a series of lectures given on Latin American Theology at Boston College, in February 2015.

<sup>4</sup> I follow here closely the excellent article of Paulo Fernando Carneiro de Andrade, “Opção pelos pobres no Magistério: Pensamento Social Católico do Vaticano II à Conferência de Aparecida,” forthcoming in *Concilium* 2015/3, Globalization and the Church of the poor.

Sauvy in 1952.”<sup>5</sup> At this point, the Third World is emerging simultaneously both as a problem and as a new agent on the international scene.<sup>6</sup>

In 1961, the number of countries participating in the FAO increased, and now incorporated Latin America, which began to be an important part of the so-called Third World. The Cuban revolution took place, marking the beginning of anti-imperialist struggles to develop marginalized parts of the world, and to break bonds of dependence on First World countries that were perpetuating the legacy of colonialism.<sup>7</sup>

In the face of this new reality, the question of how the Church was to be present in such places and evangelize their peoples became a very controversial one. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Church had been conscious of having lost the working classes. The openness of the Church towards social problems, especially manifest in Pope Leo XIII’s Encyclical Letter, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), was the fruit of a slow preparation in which lay ‘social pioneers,’ activists as well as thinkers, played a major role.<sup>8</sup>

The publication of the encyclical *Rerum novarum* of Leo XIII in 1891 was an attempt to repair the breach that had opened up between the Church and the poor, which resulted from industrial revolution. In the twentieth century, this same Church turned to the Third World,<sup>9</sup> eager to hear the cries of the poor and to respond to their fears and aspirations.

On September 11, 1962, one month before the beginning of Vatican II, John XXIII made a broadcast that surprised both the Church and the wider world. He affirmed: “Where the underdeveloped countries are concerned, the Church presents herself as she is. She wishes to be the Church of all, and especially the Church of the poor.”<sup>10</sup> Thanks to the Pope’s words, the idea of the Church of the poor broke through.<sup>11</sup> The Council opened up new paths, and its reception in Latin America led to a structural critique of an evangelization conducted for elites, and servicing stakes.<sup>12</sup>

The Theology of Liberation—a new structural approach to theology as a whole—took as its starting point the question of: “What does it mean to be a Christian in a continent of poor and oppressed people?” What is at stake is a theology seeking to make common cause with the pastoral practice of a Church that has

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<sup>5</sup> See Alfred Sauvy in the French magazine *L’observateur*, on 14 August 1952 apud P.F. C. de Andrade.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See R. Gil Benumeia, “Tradición y actualidad em la evolución internacional del socialismo árabe,” *Revista de política Internacional*, 89 (1967): 37–54; and E. Almeida, ‘O Pan-Africanismo e a formação da OUA, *Revista geo-paisagem* ano 6, n. 12 July-December 2007, 23 available online: <http://www.feth.ggf.br/África.htm> (acessado 19/08/14 as 9:00 horas). Para América Latina: E. Faletto, “Los años 60 y el tema de la dependência,” *Estudos avançados*, v. 12, n. 33, May/August (1998), São Paulo”, p. 5 (cited in P.F.C de Andrade).

<sup>8</sup> ITC, Document of the Catholic Church, n. 73

<sup>9</sup> See the 1974 word of W. Buhmann, *O Terceiro Mundo e a Terceira Igreja*, Paulinas, São Paulo, 1976.

<sup>10</sup> John XXIII, opening speech of the II Vatican Council.

<sup>11</sup> P.F. Carneiro de Andrade, art. Cit.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Pe. H. Lima Vaz, *Igreja Reflexo / Igreja Fonte. Cadernos Brasileiros* (Rio de Janeiro) 46 (1968): 1722.

intended to make itself freely poor, that places itself at the side of the poor, and commits itself to the processes of liberation from all forms of oppression and marginalization.<sup>13</sup>

This theological movement of Liberation Theology began with an attentive and careful listening to people from the grassroots who expressed their feeling of distance from the official Church and their desire to find responses to their anxieties on the oppression that weighed on them. Also the Church listened to the those middle class Christians, lay or religious, who were conscious of the inequality that divided the continent and questioned a pastoral approach that worked mainly with the elite.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, this offered a Theology that wants to be listening closely to the culture of the indigenous peoples, to speak the language of these cultures and to appreciate their traditions, their rituals, their worshiping. This Theology doesn't want to end up with those traditions as non-Christian ones, but to respect them as they are and extract from them inspiration and material for its reflection. Moreover, where those traditions and cultures live together with Christian culture brought by colonial evangelization, the effort has to be made of integrating them as constitutive parts of the process of Church discourse and praxis.

Such integration would be our opportunity, in the view of prominent Brazilian philosopher Henrique de Lima Vaz, for the Latin American Church to make a step from being a Church that only projects and reflects European Church and Theology to a Church that is a source of a native and original living of the Gospel, which can generate a new way of thinking and speaking about God, that is, of doing theology originating from a continent that is poor and oppressed.

Who, however, are the poor? The behavior and praxis of the poor are the center of Christian life. Jon Sobrino came to define what we understand by "poor" in Latin American Liberation Theology. "The *analogatum princeps* of the poor, of those by whom the Church made a preferential option in the 60s is, very concretely, those human beings to whom the fundamental fact of living is a heavy burden and a hard struggle in the middle of total insecurity and precarious conditions, even concerning the most elementary and basic human rights: eating, housing, health, etc."<sup>15</sup> Biblically speaking, they are those who are bent, bowed, humiliated for life, together with ignored and despised by society.<sup>16</sup>

That is the understanding of "poor" in Latin American theology. The poor are those who are first of all socio-economically poor. That is not an ideological expression. Poor are those who are stripped of life and happiness, of any kind.<sup>17</sup> Frei Betto, another well-known liberation theologian powerfully describes reality on the continent:

To speak about human rights in Latin America is a luxury.  
Here, we are still struggling for the rights of animals, because to

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<sup>13</sup> De Andrade, 8–9.

<sup>14</sup> Among those, we have to highlight the importance of the movement Ação Católica (Action Catholique), which began in France but became very important in Latin America during the 50s and the 60s.

<sup>15</sup> John Sobrino, "Opción por los pobres," in *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología*, no. 251.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

eat, to have a roof over the head, to feed and raise, and breed have to do with animals and beasts. I have never seen a veal abandoned in the streets of Brazil or a cow at the corner of the street waiting for someone to give it food. However, there are 8 million abandoned children and thousands of beggars searching something to eat in garbage cans.<sup>18</sup>

Together with this poverty, there is also socio-cultural poverty. This element was very much stressed by the Theology of the People (*Teología del Pueblo*), which became very important for the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, today Pope Francis. The Theology of the People was, according to Gustavo Gutiérrez, a stream with its own characteristics within Liberation Theology.<sup>19</sup> Among the most important figures of this theology are—according to V. Azcuy<sup>20</sup>—Lucio Gera<sup>21</sup> and Rafael Tello<sup>22</sup> in the first generation, J.C. Scannone in the second, and Carlos Galli in the third. The proper method of this theology is to work with cultural and symbolic mediations as hermeneutical choices.

Scannone defines the steps for this theology as follows:

1. It begins with the Latin American peoples, the original peoples in whose wisdom and religion is frequently enculturated the people of God.
2. The preferential use of historical-cultural analysis as a mediation to interpret and to judge historical and social reality of the poor in the light of faith.
3. To use human sciences in a more synthetic and hermeneutical way as history, cultural anthropology or sciences of religion and also symbols and narratives, without despising more analytical sciences.
4. Since its inception this school of thought made a critique of the use of a Marxist mode of analysis, considered not enough critical, from Liberation Theology. The poor have, nevertheless a special place within the central categories of a *Teología del Pueblo*: people, popular religion, culture.

Liberation theologians, however, never denied the importance of cultural poverty.<sup>23</sup> Together with socio-economic poverty, there is also the socio-cultural one, equally hard and heavy. There is [also] racial, ethnic and sexual oppression and

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<sup>18</sup> Frei Betto, *Derechos humanos ou direitos animais?* Available at <http://www.correiocidadania.com.br/antigo/ed373/opiniao.htm> (accessed July 1, 2015) (translation mine).

<sup>19</sup> G. Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, Lima, CEP, 1979, 377.

<sup>20</sup> *Teología ante el reto de la pobreza una perspectiva latinoamericana, desde las mujeres*, texto en elaboración, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Lucio Gera is considered the main inspiration for this Argentinian trend. For more about him beyond his writings, see R. Ferrara – C. Galli, ed., *Presente y futuro de la teología en Argentina. Homenaje a Lucio Gera* (Buenos Aires: Paulinas, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> I follow here the contribution of V.M. Fernández : “Creo que nadie se acercó teológicamente al pobre como el padre Rafael Tello. Él es –junto con Lucio Gera– una de las grandes figuras de la ‘teología de la cultura popular’. Por eso me parece injusto, aun cuando a él pueda desagradarle todo homenaje, que casi nunca se lo mencione cuando se habla de la teología argentina”, cf. *Con los pobres hasta el fondo. El pensamiento teológico de Rafael Tello*, en: V.R. Azcuy (coord.), *Semillas del siglo XX*, Proyecto 36 (2000) 187–205, 187.

<sup>23</sup> See J. Sobrino, “Opción por los pobres.”

discrimination. In addition, very often, the fact of being an afro-descendant, indigenous, or a woman, increases the difficulty of living. These difficulties are not separate from socio-economic reality, but it happens very frequently, at least in the Third World, within it. That is the reason why Liberation Theology chose to face socio-economical poverty as a central priority. It is what described better both then and now poverty in the world, which is compounded by forms of oppression that originated from other kinds of discriminations.

The entire movement for a new pastoral point of departure that happened on the continent, new priorities and a new way of doing theology, was proposed as a new three-point action plan for the Church, as proclaimed by the Medellín Conference of 1968: faith and justice together, inseparably united, as priorities; a new way of doing theology, with the method: to see—to judge—to act; a new model of Church, starting from how local communities at the base and in poor areas, gathered around the Scriptures, expressed themselves. It was centered on the popular reading of the Bible, which has its own method for approaching the Scripture,<sup>24</sup> and was marked by a desire to be a Church of the poor.<sup>25</sup> These points were confirmed at Puebla in 1979 as a preferential option for the poor, a theology of liberation, and the ecclesial base communities as a new way of being Church.

The base ecclesial communities were a very important area where we could feel and experience the *sensus fidelium* in action. Those small communities, gathered usually outside churches and parishes, formed by people at the grassroots, where the Bible could be discussed, and celebration could happen—they were the model of how the poor can find together a path for their liberation.

The Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) spread all over the continent, especially in some countries, as Brazil. There happened to be around 80,000 in the 80s. The reason for their growth is that they offered a simpler and horizontal way of being Church, based on the reading of the Bible, confronting the facts of precarious life, which led to transformative actions to benefit the poor. The creator of the method of the so-called Biblical Circles was the Carmelite Carlos Mesters, and those circles were the germ of what would be in the near future the CEBs. In a huge country like Brazil, with not enough clergy to attend the Catholic communities, those communities provided a hope and a way of cultivating faith and linking it with their everyday life. They were led specially by sisters, lay people (mostly women) and began to be several thousand all over the continent, organizing every two years a huge meeting where bishops and leaders prayed, reflected and celebrated together.

Leonardo Boff, at this point a Franciscan friar, was the one who developed an ecclesiology that came out of those communities. That is the topic of his book: *EcclesioGenesis: A New Way of Being Church*. He was one of the great lights of this movement, who produced and did a theology arising from this option for the poor,

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<sup>24</sup> The popular reading of the Bible had its method composed and developed by the Carmelite Carlos Mesters and has three steps: reality (fact of life); gospel enlightenment (Bible text); and transforming action.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Documento de Conclusões da Conferencia do episcopado latino-americano em Medellin, Colombia, 1968 in [http://www.celam.org/conferencia\\_medellin.php](http://www.celam.org/conferencia_medellin.php) (accessed on July 1, 2015).

called Liberation theology, together with the then diocesan priest Gustavo Gutiérrez.<sup>26</sup>

The communities were especially active in rural parts of Latin America where parish priests were not always available, as they placed a high value on lay participation. They suffered also the consequences of all that happened in 1989 with the fall of utopias and the consequences for Latin American theology. As of May 2007, it was estimated that the number of base communities has radically diminished, but in the poorest and more isolated parts of the continent, they are still very active.<sup>27</sup>

Considered a “new way of being Church,” an alternative to traditional parish life, those communities were and are formed by poor people and by pastoral agents who identified themselves with them and wanted to share their life. This fact shows that Liberation Theology, despite the endorsement by Gutiérrez, Boff, and others, strove to be a bottom-up movement in practice, with biblical interpretation and liturgical practice designed by lay practitioners themselves, rather than by the orthodox Church hierarchy. Many initiatives born of the creativeness of the CEBs were afterwards assumed by the authorities of the Church, especially about liturgy, interpretation of the Bible, and even a new way of doing theology.

It is the *sensus fidelium* in truth and in action. The biblical circles and the embryos of the basic communities confronted the facts on the ground with the word of God to extract a way of acting capable of transforming unjust reality. And they offered a powerful contribution to deep and beautiful transformations that happened in the Church of the continent.

### ***The Biblical Circles: Reading the Bible and Listening to the People***

Before Vatican II, Catholics didn't have much access to the Bible. They received the Scripture through the filter of the magisterium. The openness of the Council and the convocation to go back to the sources represented a delivery of the Scripture to the hands of the people.

In Latin America, in particular, where the pre-conciliar pastoral focus was mostly on sacraments, the new emphasis on giving the Bible into the hands of the faithful was a true revolution. The desire to know the Bible inspired many people to read more frequently the scriptural text and to develop a more free interpretation of it. The new translations and the work of the exegetes fostered much of that. Moreover, the growing missionary movement of evangelical churches challenged Catholics to learn more deeply the biblical text.

There have been very many initiatives to promote the reading of the Bible in the Church on the continent, with the result that the groups who did it multiplied by hundreds and thousands.

Carlos Mesters was responsible for creating a method to read the Bible in small and poor communities called Biblical Circles. This method has three steps, which is very much in accordance with the *sensus fidelium*, common to each and every

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<sup>26</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez is now a Dominican, and Leonardo Boff left the Franciscans and priesthood, despite his continuing to publish on theology and philosophy.

<sup>27</sup> Declaration of Don Erwin Kreutler.

community: 1) to see the facts of life; 2) to be enlightened by the word of God; and 3) to motivate the people and the community to serve and transform reality.<sup>28</sup>

This method is characterized by three criteria. First, the poor bring to the reading of the Bible the problems of their lives. From this perspective, they read the Bible. The reading, then, takes place in community. It is first a communitarian reading, a prayerful practice, an act of faith; it is an obedient reading, listening to God, ready to change and transform life if God wants it so. Therefore, to know the Bible brings more vitality into community; to coexist in community brings about service to the people; to serve the people brings about the wish for a deeper knowledge of the Bible, its origins, etc. A continuous dynamic brought the poor who had this contact with the word of God to transform not only reality, but also the Church. It inspired, moreover, many theologians who were close to them and listened to their desires and claims.

The biblical circles and the popular reading of the Bible were the embryos of the base communities. The base communities multiplied everywhere the biblical circles, together with reflection groups, gospel groups, family groups, and others took hold. The communities were gathered around the Bible. During the 70s, these communities were more stable and showed a new face of the Church. They decided to promote themselves nationally and internationally. The Intereclesial Encounters of the CEBs started to happen periodically. The communitarian dimension lived by the CEBs starting from the Bible even renewed many parishes that started to organize themselves as a “community of communities.”<sup>29</sup>

Especially after 1968, with the results of the Medellín Conference, there was an important step made as a result of this scriptural reading by the poor gathered in communities. The growing knowledge of the Bible and renewed communal impulse provided an incentive to discern more actively the pastoral goal of serving the people and transforming reality. The people of the biblical circles and of the CEBs had neither the money nor the time to read books about the Bible. Therefore, they started to read the Bible based on the only criterion they had, which is to say, their faith life, lived in community and their painful life under oppression. Reading the Bible in this way, they discovered what they didn't know: the history of the people of God, very similar to their history, of oppression and struggle for the same values they desire and sought—land, justice, sharing, fraternity. In short, they came to know the meaning of a human life. The fruit of that discovery and the liberating practice that resulted from it was reflected and elaborated by Liberation Theology and influenced the whole Church. It is during this the period where faith began to be thought of as inseparable from its political dimension.

In raising churches' consciousness of themselves and their mission there emerged an enlightening evolution: one of struggling for the defense of the life of a people threatened by poverty and oppression. During the 70s the CEBI (Centro de Estudos Bíblicos—Center for Biblical Studies) was established, which promoted a Popular Pastoral approach that has as its goal to articulate, to explain, to deepen, to publicize and to legitimate the reading of the Bible, which people were already doing in their communities.

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<sup>28</sup> See. Carlos Mesters.

<sup>29</sup> See *Comunidade de comunidades: uma nova paróquia* (Community of communities: a new parish), (Brasília: Edições CNBB, Coleção Estudos, 2013).



Inspired by those poor who dealt with the Scripture and felt at home with it, the whole Church was transformed and turned attention to the poor, committed to take part in their liberation process. The spiritual life generated by this commitment was ardent and impressive.<sup>30</sup> In addition, many wanted to share, at least in some measure, the effects of injustice and oppression with the poor and make deep and radical changes in their own lives in order to do so.<sup>31</sup>

Among those engaged in this work, women were among the most important. After the great event of the Second Vatican Council, the female voice began to be heard more and more, occupying spaces inside the Church and doing so effectively. Women coordinated communities at different levels, questioned the denial of women's access to priestly ministry, produced theoretical reflections about religious experience and the doctrinal contents of Christian faith. The fact is that today it is not possible to do theology or pastoral work, or to lead Church life in our continent without taking into account the contribution of women.

### ***Women Listening to Women and Producing Theology***

Vatican II opened a door to the participation of women in the Church. The relegation of women to second-class status is virtually everywhere and direct violence against women is a very common phenomenon globally. Positively, the twentieth-century did see impressive momentum toward the recognition of women's rights as human rights, progress in women's education, and greater employment opportunities for women in virtually all sectors of society. Within the Church, women began to come out of an invisibility that had lasted for many centuries and began to participate in the Church in a more concrete way. On the other side, such reforms met fierce resistance, and are too rarely implemented at the practical level, even when guaranteed by law.<sup>32</sup>

During the 70s, Latin-American women started to explore theology within Latin-American Churches, interdependently with the poor and motivated by the option for the poor. Their vision and their attentiveness turned towards their sisters in the North, who were opening up discussions about the possibility of thinking and speaking "beyond God the Father," and about the patriarchal approach dominant in theology.<sup>33</sup> They saw, as a strong and beautiful challenge, the possibility to jump-start a theology in which they participated as producers and not only consumers. Nevertheless, Latin-American theology done by women is not completely similar to feminist theology

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. documento de Conclusões da Conferencia do episcopado latino-americano em Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, em 1979, in [http://www.celam.org/conferencia\\_puebla.php](http://www.celam.org/conferencia_puebla.php) (accessed on July 1, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Pedro Arrupe, *Discours d'ouverture à la Congrégation des Procureurs*, in J. Y. Calvez, *Foi et justice. Dimension sociale de l'évangélisation* (Paris: coll Christus, DDB-Bellarmin, 1985), 56.

<sup>32</sup> See Lisa Cahill, "Journeys of Liberation: Catholic Theological Ethics Beyond Vatican II," conference address delivered at the International Symposium for the 50 years of Vatican II and Concilium Journal, Rio de Janeiro, May 26–28, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father, Toward a philosophy or woman's liberation* (New York: Beacon Press 1973).

done in the northern hemisphere. It is inseparable from the option for the poor, since that is constitutive of its configuration.<sup>34</sup>

The women who, in those years, entered theology courses, and went on the adventure of the elaboration of their own thinking about the mystery of God and His/Her revelation were not only motivated by their personal desire, although it is clear that at the roots of the act of doing theology there is always a desire. For those pioneers, however, a desire bigger than themselves allowed them to dare the impossible: to venture into a world which had been dominated by men and, almost entirely, by celibate clergy. This was a world where feminine thinking and presence only had an indirect entry. This was the world where the “crazy” ones of that first moment started to articulate their reflections and dared to take their first theological steps.<sup>35</sup>

However, there was also the challenge of reality. Women who intended to do theology in this initial moment had their eyes turned to the reality of the poor and perceived that theology should be done in close dialogue with social sciences. They also perceived a phenomenon that later on was called “the feminization of poverty.”<sup>36</sup> A poor person, who is also a woman, is doubly poor, since her female condition adds to her poor and marginalized condition, making it more complex and more difficult. It was then when a new solidarity emerged in Latin America, one that linked women theologians with poor women who were and worked at the grassroots in community. The former understood themselves as spokespersons for the latter, and responsible for recovering their rights. The encounters of female theologians and pastoral ministers, in a fertile and revealing progression, demonstrated a collective face of passion and a commitment to struggle for justice, inseparable from the building of the Kingdom of God.<sup>37</sup>

The encounters, colloquia, and congresses among women theologians were repeated at national, continental, and intercontinental levels. The movement realized by them started to receive attention, to raise curiosity and reactions, both favorable

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. S. Suaiden, “Questões contemporâneas para a teologia—Provocações sob a ótica de gênero,” in SOTER (org.), *Genero e Teologia. Interpelações e perspectivas*, (SOTER/Paulinas/Loyola: SP 2003), 147.

<sup>35</sup> “Crazy” means *locas*. I allude here clearly to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in Argentina, called “las locas,” by the dictatorship they challenged.

<sup>36</sup> The introduction of this concept is given by the American Diane Pearce, in an article published in 1978. For her, the feminization of poverty is a process that develops from the moment when women with children have no more a husband or partner living in the same household and taking responsibility for the maintenance of the family. In this perspective, the feminization of poverty is when women, home alone, have to take care of their children and provide for their wellbeing.

<sup>37</sup> The topics of the meetings, which took place at the national level and Latin American level attest to this agglutination and organization done by the female pastoral theological community as an active subject in the ecclesial community. The topics include these: “Woman: that he learned to instead ignore” (1984), “Women: in search of its identity” (1985), “The woman broke the silence” (1986), “Doing theology in the feminine plural” (1987). The leaders followed by others who maintained key points of these first steps: the occupation of a different place not assigned to a woman before; the encounter of a new identity given by the other; the breaking of the silence and the access to visibility and audibility in ecclesial space; and configuring a theological community which, in solidarity and plurality, assumes women are partners in the knowledge and in the theological task.

and unfavorable. They were at some times full of joy and hope, at other times full of aggression, irony or sarcasm, and rejecting the uncomfortable novelty. Ecumenical since their beginning, those encounters helped Latin-American female theologians to live out—beyond the covenant with the grassroots women—a fertile interaction among Catholics and Protestants, which brought a mutual enrichment and built a solid basis for the future.

Women theologians' struggle in Latin America acquired a new status different from desire or dream. It started to be a concrete reality. Besides their presence in the pastoral grassroots, women developed an open space within faculties and institutes of theology, in a long and laborious effort to obtain academic degrees, which would allow them to gain equal voice vis-à-vis their male companions. This represented a long journey, a search for recognition, presence, and visibility in spaces that had been predominantly male. It was an attempt to attain citizenship and legitimacy through a different and alternative way of doing theology, a way where head, heart, and body are united in a fertile and harmonic dance whose product is a different reflection about faith.

Listening to and observing what happened in the popular layers of the local Church, women not only entered the world of theology, but also pastoral work and ministries at the grassroots level of the Church. In the 80s, when the fruits of Vatican II began to mature, and the Church in Latin America assimilated more in depth the conferences of Medellín and Puebla, women dared to challenge an ecclesial situation that didn't allow them to have a more visible and effective presence with the people of God. Many of them both lay and religious women, started to take over ministries in the communities. From the coordination of communities to liturgical celebrations, women leading their communities, as they lived out a Church model in which power is freely shared, and decisions are taken more collectively, rendered countless services.

The occupation of such an open space began to outline a new paradigm for the Church, one that was highly positive and very welcomed by the people. In the 90s, these routes were deepened, following new and difficult paths through which Christian woman could find her place in the ecclesial space. The services women rendered testify to the leap that has taken place in their ecclesial consciousness and in the renewal that is being processed in her and from her, as the strength of the Spirit moves her to serve.

The Brazilian Conference of Bishops recognized explicitly the role of women in their participation in and contribution to the preparation of the document for the CELAM conference held at Aparecida.<sup>38</sup> The same document of Aparecida mentions the importance of women in different ecclesial services, stating, for the first time, that they should be actively participating in levels of decision-making in the Church.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Consider the claim, "the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church." In light of the fact that 80% of Brazilians Catholics are prevented from celebrating the Eucharist on Sunday, we must conclude that 80% of Brazilian Catholics are deprived of the most important dimension of ecclesiology. It also suggests that the issue of the ordained ministries for lay people is considered more seriously, together with the possibility of regaining the ministry by married priests.

<sup>39</sup> See Documento de Aparecida, 458.

Intuitions of women, starting from the grassroots and coming up to the levels of decision are changing the face of the Latin American Church. It is, again, the *sensus fidelium* that is taking place before our eyes.

*Conclusion: Sensus Fidei and its Fruits Today*

Today the Latin American Church is experiencing an unexpectedly good moment, thanks to Pope Francis' pontificate. Many signs show that the process that began humbly and discretely, with the deep intuitions and practices of those rescued are being reflected upon by theologians and pastoral agents are again alive and confirmed by the whole Church after a long period of Ecclesial Winter.<sup>40</sup>

The memory of great church leaders is being revived and honored; the sacrifice of bishops and priests killed under military dictatorships is being recognized and venerated; and some theologians once accused of unorthodoxy are being embraced and their achievements newly valued.<sup>41</sup> The first Latin American pope has given the church in his home continent full citizenship in the universal church.

A new day has dawned for the church in Latin America under Pope Francis. Moreover, this new and hopeful moment owes a lot to the experiences that *sensus fidelium* brought in to the Latin American Church between the years 1970 and 1980.

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<sup>40</sup> This is Rahner's expression. In his last interview, in March 5, 1984, he speaks about a winter in the Church in *Il Regno* 29 (1984): 286–94.

<sup>41</sup> See the article of Gerard O'Connell in <http://americamagazine.org/issue/latin-american-revival> (accessed on July 1, 2015): "While this attitude first emerged in the last years of Paul VI's pontificate, it flourished under St. John Paul II and, to an extent, also under Benedict XVI. This caused much suffering not only to theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez (in Peru), the Boff brothers (in Brazil) and others, but also to courageous pastors like Paulo Evaristo Arns, Ivo Lorscheiter and Hélder Câmara (Brazil), Juan Landázuri Ricketts (Peru), Taita Proaño (Ecuador), Óscar Romero (El Salvador), Samuel Ruiz García (Mexico) and many more."