Chapter V

THE PUEBLA CONFERENCE

The years after the Second Bishops Conference in 1968, were marked by crisis after crisis in the State as well as the Church in Latin America. Indices of crisis in popular governments appeared already prior to 1968, for example, the fall of Goulart in Brazil in 1964, and of Illia in Argentina in 1966. But, between 1967 and 1970 that crisis reached its zenith. The crisis of popular rule included the crisis of democracy and the explosion of right and left extremists. The crisis ended, it was thought, with the establishment of authoritarian regimes. However, before the final triumph of authoritarianism there were some uncertain years as in Brazil between 1964 and 1968 when unmitigated authoritarianism was established through the Institutional Act No. 5 of 1968, and in Chile between 1970 and 1973 when the Marxist experiment was tried out.

Events leading to Puebla

The assumption of power by the military in most Latin American countries was followed by an organization (in defence of Western Christian civilization) of an all-embracing permanent policy of preventive action against all revolutionaries who were thought to be Marxist-oriented and subversive, and who were supposed to
have infiltrated everywhere. A vast majority of the Catholic middle class and some sectors of the clergy and bishops were also convinced that Marxism had infiltrated into the Church and its various movements. Campaigns organized via mass media created a feeling of great insecurity causing the more fearful Church sectors to approve repressive measures and accept law and order systems as proposed by the Doctrine of National Security. The Church showed itself divided between a radical left wing and a right wing favourably disposed to the military regimes, with a confused and vacillating centre group somewhere between the two, as explained above.

The systematic repression on a continental scale began in 1969-1970 and continued with intensity until 1975-1976. The repression took various forms, but it was generally selective so as not to come into frontal conflict with the institutional Church. Care was taken to demonstrate that the state was provoked into it, and only "duly proved" and "isolated" cases were being dealt with.² Mass media and pamphlets were used to threaten and calumniate particular persons, arrests, detentions, tortures, kidnaps and assassinations of Church personnel became common. During the period 1964-1978, throughout Latin America there were as many as sixty-nine

murders, twenty-one kidnappings, seventy-one cases of tortures, two hundred and seventy-nine expulsions and seven hundred and eighty-eight cases of attacks, arrests or imprisonments. This included the murder of one bishop (since then one more has been assassinated in El Salvador), expulsion of another and twenty-one cases of attacks, arrests or imprisonment of bishops. The repression against the bishops reached its climax on 9 August 1966, when the Ecuadorian military regime detained and subsequently deported sixteen bishops including four from the United States, who were attending a non-political pastoral meeting in Riobamba organized by bishop Preano who was a known progressive. Hundreds of thousands of lay Catholics were subjected to various kinds of repression during the same period. Reports of various human rights organizations describe the wave of terror unprecedented in the history of Latin America unleashed in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay and the more traditional dictatorships of Central America. Amnesty International, for example, reported twenty thousand cases of arrests, imprisonment and kidnappings in Argentina alone since the military seized power in 1973 till June 1976. Even in the so-called democratic countries like Colombia and Mexico repression by the State was not uncommon.

3 DIAL (Paris), D 497, 11 January 1979, p.2.
4 For a detailed account of the incident and the reactions it created in Latin America and abroad, see MCEC-JECI, Los Sucesos de Riobamba (Lima, 1976).
The increasing repression especially of Church personnel had one wholesome effect on the institutional Church. Many in the hitherto neutral sectors of the Church rallied to the side of the progressives to oppose the state repression. As Antoine points out, this led to the emergence of what he calls, "pastorally minded" type of bishops who were not necessarily as socially committed as the "radical" bishops, but, when conflict arose with the powers over repression especially of Church personnel (some only in these cases), they joined hands with the "radical" bishops in denouncing the fascist and oppressive actions of the state, and organizing various organizations for the protection of human rights. 6 Vallier calls them "pastoral" radicals as opposed to "clerical" radicals. 7 Williams and Einandi describe them as "modernizers". 8 All maintain that they opt for a liberal and a political approach. This has happened especially in Brazil after 1967 and in Chile after 1974. From a position of initial justification of the military take-overs, 9 a majority of bishops had veered round to the position of denouncing the oppressive actions of the military governments. Individual and joint pastoral letters of the bishops in various countries in the 1970s, reveal the new alignment and denunciation

9 See Chapter IV above.
of the authoritarian regimes and the repression they had unleashed.

In these pastoral letters the theoretical reflection of the bishops accompanied the praxis of the Church taking as its points of reference the Christian faith and the declarations of Medellin. They were moral judgements which came from the heart of Christian faith. Sin was seen not only as personal but also in its social and structural dimensions in an attempt to reconcile the religious-moral with the socio-political code of conduct. The new role of the Church under repressive regimes was described by liberation theologians as the prophetic role. Thomas Bruneau in his study of the political transformation of the Brazilian Church describes how it has become progressively aware of its prophetic role.\footnote{11} It assumed the role of defender of human rights and the voice of those who have no voice. The documents, "I Have Heard the Cries of My People", issued by the North-eastern regional bishops in 1973, and "Marginalization of a People" by the West-central regional bishops represent the prophetic voice in a particularly outstanding way.

\footnote{10} Among the Brazilian Bishops' best known pastoral letters are: "The Marginalization of a People" (1973); "I have Heard the Cry of My People" (1975); "You shall not Oppress Your Brother", (1975); "Pastoral Message to the People of God" (1976); and "Christian Imperatives of a Political Order" (1977). For Chile see joint pastorals, "Gospel and Peace" (September 1975); "Our life as a Nation (March 1977), etc; For Bolivia see "Peace and Fraternity" (February 1977) and others; For Paraguay, "Amidst Persecutions and Consolations" (12 June 1976) and others. Similar pastorals have come from El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Uruguay.

\footnote{11} Thomas Bruneau, \textit{The Political Transformation of the Brazilian Catholic Church} (London, 1974), pp.79ff.
They are cries of denunciation and hope expressing the voice of the masses, previously reduced to silence and target of manipulatory projects against which they had no way of protecting their rights. Another outstanding testimony of that prophetic Church is the letter of the Paraguayan Bishops’ Conference in 1973. 12 The prophetic model penetrated the Church in other countries too, and was introduced into the universal Catholic Church by some Latin American bishops in the Synod held in Rome in 1974. 13

The praxis of this pastoral role consisted of, apart from the prophetic denunciations, the creation of several agencies for the promotion of human rights and the formation of the Basic Christian Communities (Comunidad eclesial de base).

The prophetic role was especially exercised in the context of widespread violations of human rights in the various countries of Latin America. 14 It was further translated into action by providing all sorts of help to the victims of repression through the various agencies the Church created for the defense of human rights. The prophetic role and the promotion of Basic Christian Communities 15

12 "Declaration of the Paraguayan Bishops", in Peruvian Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Between Honesty and Hope (Lima, 1968), pp.112-17.


14 Many pastoral letters denouncing violations of human rights were issued in the 1970s by individual bishops as well as several groups of bishops. Several of the most representative ones have been collected in two volumes in LADOC, Latin American Bishops Discuss Human Rights (Washington D.C.1977) 2 Vols

15 See the section below on Basic Christian Communities.
constituted the heart and soul of the pastoral role of the progressive sectors of the Latin American episcopate.

Parallel to these were the activities of some conservative bishops (a great majority of them in Colombia, Venezuela and Puerto Rico and quite a few in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, etc.) who not only supported the efforts of the authoritarian regimes in repressing what they believed was the communist menace but even organized or encouraged conservative and reactionary lay movements such as the League for the Protection of Tradition Family and Property (TFP), the Latin American Anti-Communist Confederation, Cursillos, Opus Dei, etc. At its annual meeting held in Asuncion, Paraguay in 1977, the Latin American Anti-Communist Confederation stressed the need for mobilizing support for the anti-Communist efforts of not only the various governments but also of the bishops.

They praised especially the Colombian and Puerto Rican Church hierarchy and some other individual bishops like Diamentina of Brazil and Cardinal Duque of Colombia. Some bishops like

16 See the joint declarations of the Colombian Episcopate "The Church may not be Active in Politics", (November 29, 1976); "The Colombian Church: Panorama, Situation Task," (July 1976), etc.
Antoine describes in detail the formation, on the right, of the famous Family Marches with God for liberty, and of the Family Rosary Crusade (both important for the fall of Goulart in Brazil) and of the Brazilian Society for the Defense of Tradition Family and Property. See Antoine, n. 6, pp. 79-82.

Lopez Trujillo, Secretary General of CELAM, and priests like Roger Vekemans, who outwardly exhibited progressivism also joined in the anti-communist activities especially through their German financed smear campaign against the liberation theologians. The repression by the right-wing regimes, the terrorism of the ultra-right organizations like the Death Squadron in Brazil, the Anti-Communist Association (ACA) in Argentina and the smear campaign unleashed by the conservative organizations like the TFP, Opus Dei, Cursillos, etc., and the newly organized CELAM departments under the influence of bishop Lopez Trujillo and Roger Vekemans fitted well into the strategy developed by CIA for Latin America which was confidentially revealed by some men in the Bolivian army.

In addition to the political, religious and cultural repression by the authoritarian regimes there was increasing gulf between the rich and poor, in all the countries of Latin America. In Brazil, for example, the much-trumpeted "economic miracle" helped an upward income redistribution favouring the wealthiest

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18 Vekemans, in his letter to the German bishops soliciting funds for his campaign against the liberation theologians, stresses the danger of Marxist infiltration into the Church. See his letter in LADOC (Washington D.C.) Vol. VII, no.13b, November 1976, pp.39-40. In response to his appeal ADVENTAT, one of the funding agencies of the German Catholic Bishops, financed the Conference of theologians held in Rome in 1977 (see Chapter IV above). New York Times reported that ADVENTAT alone funneled over one hundred million dollars into CELAM, sizeable sum of which was used to finance Vekeman's campaign against Catholic radicals in general and liberation theologians in particular. See Penny Lernonx "The Long Path to Puebla", in John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, ed., Puebla and Beyond (New York, 1979), p.27, footnote no.61.

19 "The Bolivian Government Plan Against the Church", LADOC footnote contd.
classes and the military. The condition of the marginalized grew worse. The dependence on the multinationals and foreign debt grew enormously. (Brazil had a foreign debt of forty-one billion dollars as of 1978). State capitalism, inflation, the forced exodus of peasants to urban slums to free land for agribusiness exports, the high rate of unemployment (thirty million Latin Americans were unemployed as of 1978, by CELAM's estimate) were all features of the oppressive regimes. Fifty percent of the people of Latin America received a mere fourteen percent of its income, according to a survey by the Organization of American States in 1978. The income of two hundred and seven million people in the six most populous countries was less than seventy five dollars a year.

It was in this socio-economic, political and religious context that the third Latin American Bishops Conference was held in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, after a long and careful preparation of two years during which were revealed more than ever before the divisions in the Church.

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(Washington D.C.), Vol.V, no.41, June 1975, pp.1-3. It is said to be a top-secret of the Bolivian Government given by a high official in the Banzer regime to ease his conscience, and counterchecked and verified with other sources. It deals with a strategy devised by the CIA and implemented by the Bolivian Government in dealing with the growing radicalism in the Church. Gonzalo Arroyo in an article has described the implementation of this strategy in Latin America as a whole. See his article "Repression of the Church by the Military and the CIA", LADOC (Washington D.C.), Vol.VII, no.23, March 1977, pp.39-55. Father Roger Vekemans connections with CIA had already been proved long before that. See Norman Kempster, "I Got $ 5 Million Covert", Jesuit Priest Reported", "Washington Star", July 23, 1975 and Richard Rashke, "Chile connection; White House, Church,CIA" National Catholic Reporter (Kansas), 29 July 1977, p.3.

20 In 1960, the richest one percent of Brazil's population received 11.7 percent of the countries total income. Ten years later
The fifteenth ordinary assembly of CELAM was held in 1974 in Rome, and recommended that the Conclusions of Medellin be studied in greater depth and implemented on a wider basis. After prolonged studies involving CELAM officials, departments, several bishops and the experts who had taken part in the Medellin Conference a document was prepared.\(^{22}\) It was not an official interpretation of Medellin Conclusions for this did not lie within CELAM's competence. Even before the publication of the document that resulted from this study, CELAM suggested to Pope Paul VI (at its sixteenth ordinary assembly in Puerto Rico, November-December 1976) the holding of a third Conference of Latin American Bishops. The Pope agreed and gave CELAM the responsibility of preparing and holding the meeting. The topic "Evangelization of Latin America Today and in the Future" was decided on later, evangelization being the theme dealt with at a general level in the Roman Synod of Bishops in 1974, and further developed in Pope Paul's encyclical Evangelii Nuntiandi (1977). The aim was to embody in a vital way in the Latin American reality the various ideas and development that emerged during the Synod.

\(^{22}\) CELAM General Secretariat, Medellin, reflexiones en el CELAM (Madrid, 1977).
It was later decided that the third Conference would take place in Puebla, Mexico, in 1978, on the tenth anniversary of Medellin, thus giving CELAM two years to prepare for it. This was to be done in three stages. 1) Representatives of all the bishops were to meet on a regional basis during July-August 1977 to select the initial themes and objectives; 2) On the basis of these, CELAM with its representatives and experts would draw up a preparatory consultative document (PCD), to be sent to all bishops, study centres, CELAM bodies etc., for further consideration; 3) The comments, criticisms and analysis of the PCD, produced by either individual or groups of bishops, would be used by the CELAM executives and experts for the production of a working document on the basis of which discussions would be conducted in the Puebla Conference.

The consultative document was prepared by a team of experts chosen mostly by bishop Lopez Trujillo, Secretary General of CELAM, and issued in December 1977. Bishop Trujillo, as noted above, had been conducting a campaign against the liberationists arguing that the Church had been infiltrated by Communists who wanted to destroy it and promote revolution. He had been claiming that both the Second Vatican and Medellin had been taken out of context and used for radical purposes. At Puebla he hoped to steer the Latin American Church away from the course of liberation on which it was set by Medellin. He was supported in his efforts by other Colombian bishops who were the only group of bishops who refused to endorse the Medellin Conclusions in their National Conference, by Vatican

23 He has written a lot to prove his point. See especially Lopez Trujillo, Liberation or Revolution (Huntington, 1975).
which had showed signs of alarm at the revolutionary tendencies in some sectors of the Church, and all other conservative elements in the Latin American Church who held that the mission of the Church was spiritual and not temporal. So, all liberation theologians were deliberately excluded from the team that prepared the document.

Issued in December 1977, the Preparatory Consultative Document reflected the position of conservatives and right-leaning moderates in the Church. It attracted an attention unprecedented for any Church document among both the conservatives and progressives. It was studied and analysed everywhere in Latin America by individuals and groups, criticized freely, creatively and sometimes even with animosity. The reactions ranged from total acceptance to outright rejection of the document. It was considered by a majority to be inadequate and even reactionary. The majority of the National Bishops Conferences rejected it as "weak", "confusing", and "superficial". Even some conservative churchmen including bishop Trujillo's fellow Colombian bishops objected to the document.

24 On several occasions Vatican showed its disapproval, Cardinal Gabriel Maria Garrone, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Education wrote a widely publicised letter chastising the CELAM leadership and the Latin American Confederation of Religious for opting for "liberating education" which according to him amounted to "politicizing". See Alfonso Murphy "CLAR, CELAM and CIEC scolded by Curia Cardinal" Latinamerica Press (Bogota), no.20, December 1973.

25 The study of the document produced an extensive literature. The Centre Lebret (Paris) lists one hundred and eighty works published up to July 1978 in a bibliography published by it titled Reactions en Document de Consulte, premiere partie.

About two hundred out of nearly three hundred Brazilian bishops met in Itaici from 18 to 25 April 1978 and found the Preparatory document totally insufficient, and drew up a new document which analyzed the conflictual Latin American reality and suggested prophetic and evangelizing actions. The document was accepted by an overwhelming majority of bishops—one hundred and sixty-three voted in favour, thirty-three against and ten abstained.27

The first and most general impression was that the Consultative Document amounted to a subtle rejection of Medellin, a kind of reduction and even a turning away from the hope-giving influence of Medellin. A group of Peruvian theologians pointed out, as did many others, that the document prepared for Puebla was more of a rejection of Medellin despite a few references to Medellin's Conclusions. This was, they pointed out in keeping with the efforts of the Secretariat of CELAM that had been feverishly active since 1972, to arrest the inexorable progress of ecclesial movements that resulted from the inspiration of Medellin.28

This rejection is almost explicit in the text when it says: "Medellin applied the renewal of Vatican II to our continent—it

moved from the Council to the Latin American reality. That is why it did not put itself explicitly in continuity with the episcopal history of Latin America but opened up new paths.\textsuperscript{29} That is to say, Medellin was only an aberration, it did not fit in with the central tradition of the episcopal history of Latin America, for it was only an application of the Council, dealing with only what happened there. A group of theologians from Mexico point out that it is hard to believe that the Medellin Conference was not a real interpretation of the Council in the context of the Latin American reality and that its Conclusions were not in line with the best early missionary action of the Church in Latin America, nor with the findings of the Council, nor with the vision of Pope John XXIII. The theological team of the Latin American Confederation of Religious representing 178,748 religious women and men, in a critical analysis of the document, makes a general observation that it not only lacked the spirit which inspired Vatican II and Medellin but even amounted to a rejection of the Medellin's approach.\textsuperscript{30}

The critics of the document specifically pointed out the reversal of Medellin's perceptions of development and of the role of the Church in the conflictual Latin American situation and its

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\textsuperscript{29} CELAM, Evangelization in the Present and Future of Latin America, Preparatory Consulting Document, IDOC, trans. (mimeo) in IDOC (Rome) doc. no.28721, para. no.86. Hereafter cited as Preparatory Document. References hereafter are to paragraph numbers.

\textsuperscript{30} "Un grupo de teologos de Mexico: en torno al Documentos de Consulta" mimeographed by CRIE (Mexico), February 1978; The theological team of the Latin American Confederation of Religious "A Critical Analysis of the Preparatory Document", in IDOC-International, n.17, p.56.
preferential option for the poor. The text's basic assumption reflected the time-worn theory of developmentalism. It speaks of tension, disorder, violence, etc. in society but in a different context, in an attempt that is perilously close to justification of political repression. It says:

These regimes have emerged in many places as a reaction to socio-economic chaos that threatened the daily existence of the people.... No society can resist a vacuum of power. Confronted by tension and disorder, resorting to violence is considered inevitable. 31

It is the same argument the army in Brazil and Chile adduced in support of their seizure of power and their repressive regimes!

Regarding the Doctrine of National Security/ is the driving force of repression and against which vast sections in the Church protest, the Preparatory Document points out:

An essential function of the state is national security: today, however, it puts itself forward as an ideology. There are a variety of interpretation in regard to this recent phenomenon in Latin America: they range from attributing to the writings upon which it is based a complete doctrinal coherence and program, to understanding it as a strategy for conducting public affairs presented in a particular military language. 32

A group of forty bishops of the Brazilian State of Sao Paulo charged that the preparatory Document was "superficially airy and non-evangelical, because it does not take into account the oppression of man by man". 33 As Clodovis Boff points out:

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32 Ibid., no.786.
"The decisive question for the Church should be social on all levels, economic and political."\textsuperscript{34} Medellin represented a positive effort to stimulate and sustain the Church's mission among the poor in Latin America as they struggle to liberate themselves from the system of oppression and exploitation. Unfortunately, as the Peruvian theologians point out, the Preparatory Document does not breathe that spirit.\textsuperscript{35} When referring to poverty and the poor it differs strikingly from Medellin. The Document says: The poor are those affected by situations of deficiency or privation...who lack material goods, who have no say...who are weak in any other dimension of life: the sick, the lonely.\textsuperscript{36} In another place it describes the poor as those "who find themselves in an objective social situation of privation".\textsuperscript{37} The description is so broad and inarticulate that any one and everyone can be included in the category of poor. As the Peruvian theologians point out: "In the end the poor are everyone and no one at the same time; so that the 'very many' poor, by no longer existing as such, evidently will no longer cause any trouble."\textsuperscript{36} The Document does not really address itself to the problem of poverty. Whenever it takes it up it tends to minimize it, and sometimes even glorifies it with the idea that the materially poor tend to be richer spiritually.

\textsuperscript{34} Clodovis Boff, "The Illusion of a New Christendom", ibid., p.70
\textsuperscript{35} Peruvian Theologians, n.28, p.187.
\textsuperscript{36} Preparatory Document, no.651.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, No.654.
\textsuperscript{38} Peruvian Theologians, n.28, p.190.
By evangelizing them and taking them to its bosom, the Church offers the poor a share in a supreme hope based on the Lord's promises. It tries to ensure that the poor, while lacking everything, are rich in having God, who being rich, became poor (2 Cor. 8:9) and that the faith, as the Word which nourishes, enables them to live with fortitude and with that joy of the Kingdom which no human sorrow can take from them. 39

This text with its clear call to resignation is not in line with contemporary theology leave alone that of Latin America.

In its perception of the role of the Church in the Latin American society the Preparatory Document goes back to the pre-Vatican dualism of the secular and the sacred, and the concept of neo-Christendom. Boff writes: "To be sure the word Christendom is never pronounced. But, it pervades the whole text. It appears under other names: new (Christian) culture...new (Christian) civilization...new society...new order". 40

The Preparatory Document not only says that Latin America, because of its Christian tradition, is called to create a "new society" defined by its Christian character, but also insinuates that if the other (secularist) societies are in crisis this is due to a lack of a "base of feeling", and that in order to overcome this crisis they will have to open up to faith, but not to any natural and positive faith but the revealed faith, that is, Christian faith. 41 It means that the Christian makes up part of

39 Preparatory Document, n.657.
40 Boff, n.33, p.65.
41 Preparatory Document, n.851.
every truly human culture, and that without it, therefore, a society would be incomplete and presumably non-human. This approach is contrary to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the autonomy of temporal realities.

The Preparatory Document speaks of modernization and warns of the dangers of secularization. It does not speak about profound social transformation as did the Medellin document. It points to a third way other than capitalism and socialism. But the third way is nothing but reformism and developmentalism which, as Dussel argues convincingly, in the final analysis represents neo-conservatism and neo-capitalism. Marxism is presented as the most abominable ideology.

The basic Christian Community that had become the heart and soul of the pastoral of the Church in Latin America receives only a brief reference in the document which contains 214 pages and 1159 paragraphs.

The Preparatory Document had one redeeming feature; Penny Lernoux points it out:

Because it so patently denied Medellin and all that had happened in the Church since, the green book set off a continent-wide debate unprecedented, in scope and depth. In contrast to Medellin, when very few lay people were involved in or even knew of the preparations, thousands of Christian grass-roots communities discussed the Puebla consultative document with their priests and bishops.

42 Ibid., no.238-44.
44 Preparatory Document, no.785.
Archbishop McGrath seems to sum up in an interview, the entire criticism that had been raised. He said: "From what I have read about the various conferences, it seems to me that suggestions... run along similar lines. viz., a desire for the Puebla conference to advance a step forward beyond Medellin". About the Preparatory Document he said: "It does not seem to us to be the kind of document that will prove useful for Puebla .... We need a document that is more biblical, more pastoral and more concrete.... We need a style more like that of Medellin". 46

In response to the widespread criticism of the Preparatory Document, a small team of moderate bishops met in Bogota in June 1978, under the leadership of the Brazilian cardinal Lorscheider, President of CELAM, and drew up a Working Document. 47 It followed in general the lines of the earlier document but it was a definite improvement on it. It came nearer to Medellin, though in a timid way. Some realistic descriptions of the human situations in Latin America have been brought in. It did not, however, remove the fears aroused by the Preparatory Document. It was feared, for example that the theology of liberation, if not condemned, was treated peripheral to Puebla. Still, the Working Document was considered a relief from the earlier more conservative document, and accepted as a basis for discussions in Puebla.

Having received a setback in the preparation of the Working Document the conservatives intensified their efforts to keep the Puebla Conference in the conservative course with the help of Vatican


47 CELAM, La Evangelización en el presente y en el futuro de América Latina: Documentos de trabajo (Bogota, 1978).
especially that of cardinal Sebastiano Baggio, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops, and President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. It was his charge to suggest to the Pope for appointment of some two hundred delegates to the Puebla Conference in addition to the one hundred and seventy-five chosen by the Latin American Bishops Conference. Vatican's choices were overwhelmingly conservative. The list of twelve additional Latin American bishops with voice and vote chosen by Vatican did not contain any progressives. Through manipulations in the national conferences and in Vatican the conservatives saw to it that many of the bishops who were in the vanguard of evangelization that was truly liberating were not present in the conference.

Of the one hundred and eighty-seven voting delegates to the conference only about twenty-five were known progressives, about forty were easily identifiable as conservatives with the remainder in the middle with a majority tending towards the right. The choice of the rest of the delegates who numbered some two hundred was much controverted. The officials of the Confederation of Latin American Religious (CLAR) that represented 178,748 religious, women and men, constituting over eighty-five percent of the total Church personnel in Latin America, were originally excluded from the list of delegates to Puebla, presumably because they were thought

48 "Puebla'78; Presencias y ausencias", Christus (Mexico), no. 515, October 1978, p. 25; Enrique D. Dussel, "Cronica de Puebla", ibid. no. 520-21, March/April 1979, p. 22. There was a concerted effort by Lopez Trujillo to keep the progressives out and to lead Puebla in one particular direction. See Frei Betto, "Tendencias politicas en Puebla", ibid., pp. 29-31. A letter of Lopez Trujillo written to bishop Luciano Duarte Cabral, and published unauthorized by the Mexican newspaper Uno Mas Uno (1 February 1979) revealed the efforts he had been making to exclude the progressives from Medellin.
to be progressives. (They had voice and vote in Medellin). This caused such an outcry, including a threat by cardinal Lorscheider to resign CELAM's presidency, that the Roman Curia had to send a belated invitation to them to attend with voice but without vote. Some twenty theologians were chosen as experts. Missing from the list were all of Latin America's best known theologians: Gustavo Gutierrez, John Luis Segundo, Hugo Assman, Enrique Dussel, John Sobrino, Leonard Boff, Ignacio Ellacuria, Raul Vidales, Jose Comblin, Segundo Galilea and Pablo Richard—all liberation theologians many of whom had participated in the Medellin Conference. They and the rest of the liberation theologians made it to Puebla, all the same, either on their own or at the invitation of individual bishops, and were available for consultation throughout the Conference.

Puebla Event and the Final Document

The most important presence in Puebla was that of Pope John Paul II. His presence was interpreted by the conservative press as an effort on the part of the Pope to check the radical tendencies in some sectors of the Latin American Church. Though in his first address in Latin America in the Dominican Republic on 25 January 1979, he showed preferential option for the poor, in the lines of Medellin, yet some of his pronouncements in Mexico gave credence to that report.

Many of the Pope's addresses were, no doubt, marked by caution and restraint, an anxiety to rule out deviations and to strengthen unity and authority in the Church. The international
capitalist press agencies, seemed determined to give a conservative interpretation to the Pope's statements anyway.\textsuperscript{49} The reports that appeared about the alleged condemnation of liberation theology by the Pope was a case in point.

Chatting with reporters who accompanied him from Santo Domingo to Mexico he said:

"You know that liberation theology is a true theology. But perhaps it is also a false theology because if it starts to politicize theology, apply doctrines to political systems, ways of analysis which are not Christian, then this is no longer theology. That is the problem. Theology of liberation, yes, but which one"? \textsuperscript{50}

Headlines in conservative Mexican dailies proclaimed that the Holy Father had rejected the theology of liberation. \textit{El Sol de Puebla}, for example, reported that the Pope said: "The theology of liberation is a false theory. If it starts to politicize, theology is no longer theology, it is social doctrine, a type of sociology, not religious doctrine". \textsuperscript{51}

The Pope's first speeches in Mexico seemed to reflect the briefing he must have received in the Roman Curia,\textsuperscript{52} but as and when he got himself acquainted with the real Latin American situation he revealed an openness of mind, and identified himself with the poor and oppressed in Latin America, and insisted on more


\textsuperscript{51} Jorge Sandoval, "Rechazo papal al' Socialismo Humano', Nego' validez a la teologia de la liberacion", \textit{El Sol de Puebla} 26 January 1979.

\textsuperscript{52} Moises Sandoval, "Report from the Conference", in John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, \textit{Ed.}, \textit{Puebla and Beyond} (New York, 1979), p.32.
equitable distribution of wealth both at the national and international level.\textsuperscript{53}

In his homily in the Basilica of Guadalupe on 27 January 1979, which marked the beginning of the Conference, he said that it had to "link up with the preceding conference of Medellin—of ten years ago", and he spoke of "its option for the human beings of Latin America, its preferential but not exclusive love for the poor, and its encouragement of full integral liberation for human beings and peoples". But he added: "... ten years have passed and there have been interpretations that are sometimes contradictory, not always correct and not always beneficial for the Church".\textsuperscript{54}

That same evening in his formal opening address of the Conference the Pope said:

The Conference now opening...is even more closely linked with the Conference of Medellin...so it will have to take Medellin's Conclusions as its point of departure, with all the positive elements contained therein, but without disregarding the incorrect interpretations that have sometimes resulted and that call for calm discernment, opportune criticism, and clearest stances.\textsuperscript{55}

The Pope seemed to have been echoing what Lopez Trujillo himself had been saying that Puebla would not accept the "false interpretations of Medellin".\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} See Pope John Paul II "Address to the Indians of Oaxaca and Chiapas", ibid., pp.81-83.

\textsuperscript{54} John Paul II, "Homily at the Basilica of Guadalupe", ibid., pp.73-74.

\textsuperscript{55} John Paul II, "Opening Address at the Puebla Conference", ibid., p.57.

Referring to the Church's mission of the promotion of human dignity the Pope said:

"In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Lord outlined the model way of attending to all human needs (Luke 10: 30 ff); and he said that in the last analysis he would identify himself with the disinherit...to whom we have offered a helping hand (Matt. 25: 53 ff). In these and other passages of the Gospel (Mark 6: 25-44) the Church has learned that an indispensable part of its evangelizing mission is made up of works on behalf of justice and human promotion". 57

Enrique Dussel points out that the essence and synthesis of the authentic theology of liberation is contained in those few words. He writes:

"The New Testament texts quoted are the very pillars of liberation theology: the poor wretch left at the wayside, outside the system, the poor man lying there before the Samaritan; Christ identified with the poor, are revelation of the Word of God...so very often the starting point for Latin American theology...this was taken by the Pope as central in his message". 58

In the same opening address Pope John Paul II made clear what he understood by liberation. Citing Pope Paul's apostolic letter Evangelii Nuntiandi he said:

The Church...has the duty of proclaiming the liberation of millions of human beings...the duty of helping to bring about this liberation' (EN.30). But it also has the corresponding duty of proclaiming liberation in its deeper, fuller sense, the sense proclaimed and realized by Jesus (EN.31 ff). That fuller liberation is 'liberation from everything that oppresses human beings, but, especially liberation from sin and the evil one, in the joy of knowing God and being known by him' (EN, 9). It is liberation made up of reconciliation and forgiveness. It is liberation rooted in the fact of being the children of God whom we are now able to call Abba, Father! (Rom.6:15). It is

57 John Paul II, n.55, p.66.
liberation that enables us to recognize all human beings as our brothers and sisters. It is liberation as the successful conquest of the forms of bondage and idols fashioned by human beings, as the growth and flowering of the new human being. 59

The Pope also spoke about the necessity of serving "the poor, the needy, the marginalized; i.e., all those whose lives reflect the suffering countenance of the Lord". 60 He wanted proclamation of the complete truth about human beings. "Human beings are not the pawns of economic or political processes... instead, these processes are geared to human beings and subjected to them". 61

He pointed out that the Church was not to be indifferent when "the growing affluence of a few people parallels the growing poverty of the masses". 62 He emphasized that "there is a social mortgage on all private property". 63 He condemned the "massive increase in violations of human rights" and upheld "the right to participate in making decisions that affect people and nations". 64 But he reminded priests and bishops that the Church's mission was not to be confused with a political task in the strict sense, or with participation in the decision-making machinery of State or party. 65

59 John Paul II, n. 57, p. 68.
60 Ibid., p. 60.
61 Ibid., p. 64.
62 Ibid., p. 67.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., p. 68.
65 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
The pronouncements of Pope John Paul II were neither conservative nor radical. His primary concern was the ecclesial unity and the proclamation of the integral message of the Gospel. As Elizondo in his study of the Pope's opening address writes:

The radicalness of John Paul is neither of the left nor of the right nor even one of the middle of the road. It is the radicalness of the whole and integral message of the Gospel in which the disinherit of the world play a pivotal role in the salvation of everyone.

Pope John Paul II did not really try to influence the conclusions of the Conference. But his presence and addresses seem to have reduced the tension and even animosity that had been built up during the preparatory period. Cardinal Loracheider, President of CELAK, in his introductory speech made it clear that the participants were under no coercion from the Working Document and that they would freely arrive at their own conclusions. The Conference chose its own co-ordinating committee instead of having a pre-arranged one, thus reducing the influence of the Secretary General and his group. The various themes were studied in twenty-one commissions, and the first draft was produced by 3 February. It was further revised on the basis of comments, and a second draft was got ready to be discussed in the first plenary meeting held on 6 February. In the Plenary Session a majority of Argentine, Colombian and Venezuelan bishops adopted a conservative position. But the real leadership lay with the great majority of Brazilian bishops.

66 Virgilio Elizondo, "The Pope's Opening Address: Introduction and Commentary", in Eagleson, n.52, p.49.
bishops who were the best prepared. They were supported by a large proportion of bishops from Central America and Peru, and some bishops from Chile, Bolivia and Mexico. A definitive draft was prepared and put to vote, section by section, and finally, accepted on 11 February. The voting pattern revealed certain amount of opposition to those sections especially that were in line with Medellin. Thus, the text of "Preferential Option for the Poor" received 43 negative votes, and that on "Action for the person in national and international society" got 38 negative votes.

The whole text thus passed along with the "Message to the people of Latin America" was submitted to the Pope for his approval. He signed the official version of the Puebla document on 23 March 1979. There were as many as one thousand alterations to the provisional text to be found in the official version. Most of them were concerned merely with style. A few, however, affected the orientation, for example, "institutionalized violence" in the provisional text was altered into "situations which may be called institutionalized violence", "sinful system" into "system clearly marked by sin", etc. The review Informations Catholiques Internationales (Paris) commented: "What the Roman Curia had failed to obtain at Puebla, it tried to achieve at Rome....However, thanks to the immediate publication of the draft Final Document of Puebla (contrary to the instruction given by cardinal Baggio) the correctors found themselves obliged to give up the idea of a complete restructuring of the text announced by Cardinal Baggio,

67 Dussel, n.48, pp.27-38.
and to confine their interventions to the application of local anesthesia to the documents of Puebla". 68

A few days after the signing of the official document of Puebla another turn of events took place in Latin America which must have pleased the Roman Curia. In the seventeenth ordinary assembly of CELAM held in March 1979, in Los Teques, Venezuela, archbishop López Trujillo was elected President of CELAM and his friend archbishop Luciano J. Cabral Duarte as first Vice-President. Against all expectations archbishop Trujillo secured thirty votes out of fifty three in the third ballot. The leadership of CELAM that had been so far in the hands of moderately progressive bishops like archbishops Larrain, Pironio, Lorscheider etc., has now been captured by the so-called moderates with definite right leanings.

Within different sectors of the Church its destiny has been conceived spiritually, socially and politically—but differently. The final document of Puebla does not resolve these tensions. But, it may be said that it goes farther towards acknowledging these tensions within the Church and dealing with them openly than the Medellin Conclusions. Because it is an attempt to reflect the disparate views of the different sectors the final Puebla document

is uneven and ambiguous at times and contains internal tensions if not contradictions. 69

Whereas the Medellin Conclusions were the result of dialogue, the final document of Puebla is the outcome of much debate (often charged with tension by delegates who had, in many cases, already taken definite stances), negotiation and many drafts. The latter, therefore, shows definite trends of compromises, and as a result, much less forceful, rich and inspiring than the former which has a prophetic ring about it. It has been rightly acknowledged by reporters and commentators that the final document of Puebla was so produced as to give at least a moderate satisfaction, if not total, to every sector in the Church. 70 In the final analysis it may be said that the final document of Puebla represents a measured step forward (the Pope in his opening address had exhorted the bishops to take "a step forward") while the Medellin Conclusions represents a leap forward.

69 John Sobrino has pointed out some of the internal tensions between texts in the final documents especially the doctrinal texts and those concerned directly with pastoral activities. See John Sobrino, S.J., "The Significance of Puebla for the Catholic Church in Latin America", in Eagleson, n.52, pp.300-01. But these internal tensions may be partly due to the procedure adopted in preparing the texts. Different commissions prepared different sections under the prevailing orientations of the members. Though they were discussed in plenary sessions and incorporated into the final document texts in each section retain some of the differing orientations of the different commissions. Sometimes the same topic, e.g., Basic Christian Communities, are treated differently by the different commissions.

The final document starts with a historical overview of the evangelization of Latin America and acknowledges the efforts of the "intrepid champions of justice and proponents of the gospel message of peace: e.g. Antonio de Montesinos, Bartolomé de las Casas, Juan de Zumárraga, Vasco de Quiroga...and all others who defended the Indians against conquistadores and encomienderos even into death, as in the case of bishop Antonio Valdivieso " 71 But no mention is made in the entire document about the concrete experience of martyrdom in contemporary Latin America, which embraces the bishops, priests, religious and people in general and has taken the form of threats, imprisonments, tortures, expulsions and murders. 72

The bishops profess to place themselves "within the dynamic thrust of the Medellin Conference (Med.: PC:2), adopting its vision


72 There were many petitions to the Conference to acknowledge the martyrs of contemporary Latin American Church. But it
of reality that served as the inspiration for so many pastoral documents". They describe the Latin American reality using the words of Evangeli Muntiandi of Pope Paul VI, in terms of "the struggle (of millions of people) to overcome the things that condemn them to live on the margin of life: hunger, chronic diseases, illiteracy, impoverishment, injustice in international relations and particularly in commercial exchanges, situations of economic and cultural neocolonialism that are sometimes as cruel as political colonialism, etc". They describe "the growing gap between rich and poor as a scandal and contradiction of Christian existence", and sees in it "a situation of social sinfulness all the more serious because it exists in countries that call themselves Catholic and are capable of changing them".

Analyzing this situation more deeply the bishops state:

"...we discover that this poverty is the product of economic, social and political situations and structures....In many instances this state of poverty...finds its origin and support in mechanisms which, because they are impregnated with materialism rather than any authentic humanism, create situation on the international level where the rich get richer at the expense of the poor who get ever poorer".

(Previous footnote contd)

was not included in any text perhaps for fear of angering repressive governments or for want of such experience in all the countries, or for lack of agreement as to what constituted a martyr in the Christian concept. Groups of bishops, however, wrote joint letters/Puebla to archbishop Romero of El Salvador (who became a martyr himself very soon) and bishop Salaza of Nicaragua acknowledging the experience of martyrdom in their countries. See Sobrino, n.69, p.299.

73 Puebla, OD, no.25.
74 Ibid., no.26.
75 Ibid., no.28.
76 Ibid., no.30.
They are aware of the "rise in what can be called institutionalized injustice" and say:

"We share other anxieties of our people that stem from a lack of respect for dignity as human beings, and such fundamental human rights as life, health, education, housing and work...To this are added...abuses of power, which are typical of regimes based on force...systematic or selective repression, accusations, violation of privacy, improper pressures, tortures and exiles". 77

The situation cries out to heaven and to God. In prophetic terms the bishops declare:

From the depths of the countries that make up Latin America a cry is rising to heaven, growing louder and more alarming all the time. It is the cry of a suffering people who demand justice, freedom and respect for the basic rights of human beings and peoples. A little more than ten years ago the Medellin Conference noted this fact...The cry might well have seemed muted back then. Today it is loud and clear, increasing in volume and intensity, and at times full of menace. 78

The text is a faint echo of the joint pastoral of the Brazilian bishops of North-east, "I Have Heard the Cry of My People" (1973) in which they have expressed in much more forceful terms the anguish and the heart-renting cry of the poor and the oppressed.

The bishops at Puebla repeatedly emphasize that, "this reality calls for personal conversion and profound structural changes", and remind the Christians of their duty to work together to change unjust structures and to communicate Christian...
values to the culture in which they are living", 80 and the Church of its "duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings, among whom are many of the Church's own children; the duty to help bring this liberation forth in the world, to bear witness to it and make sure that it is total". 81 In another text the bishops perceive the duty of the Church as "trying to help human beings to move from less human to more human conditions". 82

However, this analysis of the sinful Latin American situation gets dissipated in the way in which the bishops describe and identify the poor and suffering. Almost anyone and every one is included in that long list. 83 The determined call for profound transformation gets muted by call for mere modernization in other texts. 84 Moreover, the cry of the poor and oppressed for liberation is neutralised by texts in other sections, which extol the virtue of suffering and exHORTS the Christians to take up their cross and transform them into a source of paschal life. 85

The bishops take note of the "novel and disturbing phenomena...the partisan political activity of priests--not as

80 Ibid., no.16.
81 Ibid., no.26.
82 Ibid., no.90.
83 Ibid., no.31-39.
84 Ibid., no.50.
85 Ibid., no.278, 279.
individuals, as some had acted in the past, but as organized pressure groups...the fact that some of them are applying social analysis with strong political connotations to pastoral work." 86

The theme is taken up again in the section on evangelization and politics and discussed at some length. The bishops distinguish between politics and political involvement or party politics, and maintain that politics in the broad sense is of interest to the Church, and hence to its pastors, 87 but "party politics is properly the realm of the lay people". 88

Citing the Synod of Bishops in 1971 they set the norm for priests and religious: Leadership or active militancy on behalf of any political party is to be excluded by every priest unless, in concrete and exceptional cases, this is truly required by the good of the community and receives the consent of the bishop... 89

The reason adduced is that political activism or option for a particular political ideology jeopardize their pastoral task of ensuring unity in the Church. The bishops, on the other hand realize that neutrality can, at times, amount to the support of the status quo when they proclaim a Gospel devoid of economic social, cultural and political implications. In practice this mutilation comes down to a kind of complicity with the established order, however unwitting". 90

86 Ibid., no.91.
87 Ibid., no.521.
88 Ibid., no. 524.
89 Ibid.,no.527
90. Ibid., no.558.
The bishops have not resolved the tension between pastoral and political activities. They have not drawn a clear-cut dividing line between the pastoral and political dimensions which they must have realized was impossible. There is an area of ecclesial reality that lies between the specifically evangelical and the concrete historical task that is necessarily bound up with political and ideological factors. To the extent this tension is not solved the bishops cannot be said to have provided an authentic pastoral guideline.

In the description of the Latin American reality various contending ideologies in Latin America are broached on. They are again taken up in the section on evangelization, ideologies and politics. It is, perhaps, for the first time in a Church hierarchical document that all the dominant ideologies in Latin America are explored and criticized at some length. After defining ideology as "any conception that offers a view of the various aspects of life from the standpoint of a specific group in society"91 the document describes the various aspects of ideology and proposes to analyze the various ideologies prevalent in Latin America. About capitalist liberalism it says:

We acknowledge that it has given much encouragement to the creative capabilities of human freedom, and that it has been a stimulus to progress. But on the other side of the coin it views 'profit as the chief spur to economic progress, free competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right, having no limit nor concomitant social obligations'... The illegitimate

91 Ibid., no.535.
privileges from the absolute right of ownership gives rise to scandalous contrasts, and to a situation of dependence and oppression, on both the national and international levels". 92

Underlying this statement seems to be the belief that capitalism is reformable. It is not as totally rejected as Marxism. The final document says of Marxist collectivism:

It too leads to the idolatrous worship of wealth— but in collective terms. It arose as a positive criticism of commodity fetishism and of the disregard for the human value of labour. But it did not manage to get to the root of that form of idolatry, which lies in the rejection of the only God worthy of adoration: God of love and Justice. 93

The bishops continue:

Some believe it is possible to separate various aspects of Marxism— its doctrine and its method of analysis in particular. But we would remind people of the teaching of the papal magisterium on this point. 94

Citing the apostolic letter of Pope Paul VI, Octogesima Adveniens, the bishops state:

It would be foolish and dangerous on that account to forget that they are closely linked to each other; to embrace certain elements of Marxist analysis without taking due account of their relation with its ideology;

92 Ibid., no. 542
93 Ibid., no. 543.
94 Ibid., no. 544.
and to become involved in the class struggle and the Marxist interpretation of it without paying attention to the kind of violent and totalitarian society to which this activity leads (OA:34). 95

But Pope John XXIII in his encyclical Pacem in Terris (1963) had expounded a different approach to Marxism. He proposed dialogue and co-operation between Christians and men of differing ideologies including Marxism. He distinguished between Marxism as a philosophy and as a historical movement with economic, social, and political analysis and objectives and admitted that as a movement it contained some positive elements. 96 He wrote:

A drawing nearer together or a meeting for the attainment of some practical end, which was formerly deemed, inopportune and unproductive, might now or in the future be considered opportune and useful...for the achievement of economic, social, cultural and political ends which are honourable and useful. 97

The underlying assumption was that Marxism as a social science contained some positive elements in its social analysis. Not only the liberation theologians but even the Medellin Conference did not reject these positive values but accepted them in their analysis of the present Latin American reality. The Puebla Conference reveals an obsession of the fear of Marxist ideology. During the plenary discussion bishop Schmitz of Peru

95 Ibid., no.545.
pointing to those who were scandalized by the possible use of some aspects of Marxism, said: "Let him who is without an ideology cast the first stone". Bishop Flores talked passionately about the "meanness" when a draft was suppressed which attempted to express gratitude to the services of a Latin American theology that analysed the realities and explored liberation more deeply than before.

As in Medellin so in Puebla the bishops rejected both liberal capitalism and Marxism. They renounced also "the fact that Latin America finds itself caught between these two options and remains dependent on one or the other of the centres of power that control its economy". They wanted the Church to maintain its freedom with regard to the opposing systems and enable men to find their way to a better future. Their statements seem to indicate the possibility of a third way, but nowhere in the document they spelt out what it is.

The bishops realized the need for some security system for order in society but declared: "The Doctrine of National Security as an absolute ideology, would not be compatible with the Christian vision of man". They added: "In recent years the so-called Doctrine of National Security has taken a firm hold in our continent. In reality it is more an ideology than a doctrine".

98 Schmitz cited by Sobrino, n.69, p.297.
99 Ibid.
100 Puebla, OD, no.550.
101 Ibid., no.549.
102 Ibid., no.547.
The contention of Lopez Trujillo was that the Doctrine of National Security was not really an ideology and that the military men themselves did not consider it so. This view was reflected in the Provisional Consultative Document which said: "There are a variety of interpretations in regard to this recent phenomenon (national security) in Latin America; they range from ...a complete doctrinal coherence and programme to understanding it as a strategy for conducting public affairs presented in a particular military language". The bishops in Puebla however, understood the Doctrine of National Security as an ideology incompatible with Christian doctrines even though it tried to justify itself as the defender of Christian civilization of the West.

The repression that flows from the Doctrine of National Security and the question of human right are dealt with in other sections. Violence coming from the state as well as terrorists and guerillas are equally condemned and it maintains that violence is neither Christian nor evangelical.

The bishops were concerned with all the aspects of human right and issued some surprisingly concrete suggestions. (Probably the experience of some bishops who had been dealing with violations

104 CELAM, Preparatory Document, para no. 786-7, 9, 800.
105 Puebla, OD, no. 530-34.
of human rights contributed to it). They stressed that the question of human rights is not an individual, but a social concern. It is, perhaps, a commentary on the condition of Latin American society today that they have to describe civil rights, such as the right to privacy, to the integrity of the person, and to free expression and speech as "emerging rights", and that they have to plead for political amnesty, right of asylum, and increased quota for refugees and migrants.

Social rights include the right to work, to an education, and to basic material goods which ensure an adequate standard of living. Human rights must be defended in relationships between nations in order to promote solidarity and justice. Specifically the bishops call for the recognition of the right of each nation to maintain its sovereignty before the transnational corporations.

Preferred option for the poor may be said to be the hallmark of the Puebla document. It is persistently recurring them throughout the document though the articulation of it differs in various sections depending upon, perhaps, the orientation of those constituting the different commissions that drew up the draft of the different sections. There is besides a whole section devoted to it. It is introduced as central to the task of evangelization. "For Jesus evangelization of the poor was one of the messianic signs, and for us too it will be an authentic sign of evangelization".

106 Ibid., p. 1031-33.
107 Ibid., no. 1052-55.
108 Ibid., no. 1264.
109 Ibid., para. 1130.
The option for the poor is preferential, not exclusive; otherwise it would destroy the universality of the Gospel message. Thus, as Gutierrez says, while no one is excluded from the message of the Gospel, no one should be surprised when the Church chooses, like its Founder, to be on the side of the poor in their lives and their sufferings, nor when it asks anyone to make the same option. 110

The preferential option for the poor had already been taken in Medellin. It is renewed in Puebla:

With renewed hope in the vivifying power of the spirit, we are going to take up once again the position of the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Medellin, which adopted a clear and prophetic option expressing preference for, and solidarity with, the poor. 111

By stressing their solidarity with the poor, and by refusing to accept or compromise with their situation, 112 the bishops made it clear that their option had nothing to do with a purely spiritualist view-point or paternalist inclination but is a real commitment to fight for justice and for the liberation of the poor. It is related to the situation of "institutionalized violence", as Medellin described it, or "injustice which may be called institutionalized" as the Puebla Official Document describes

110 See Gustavo Gutierrez, La Fuerza Historica de los Pobres (Lima, 1979), especially the Chapter on "Pobres y liberacion en Puebla", pp.41-82.

111 Puebla, OD, no.1134.

112 Ibid., no.1209.
it (the Puebla Final Document described it as "injustice which is institutionalized"), and to the efforts for the change of structures which create the situation in which "the growing affluence of a few people parallels the growing poverty of the masses". 113

The preference for the poor has a clear theological basis: God has revealed his preferential love for the poor because He is just and good. The preferential option is for the poor because it is the poor man who suffers from injustice and neglect. 114 It has moreover, a Christological basis: "This situation of extreme poverty takes on very concrete faces in real life. In these faces we ought to recognize the suffering features of Christ the Lord, who questions and challenges us". 115

It is precisely from these premises that a genuine Latin American theology, the liberation theology is formulated, which does not get adequate support from the Puebla Conference, though the attempts made in the first Consultative Document to undermine it, is not reflected in Puebla's Final Document.

Another significant development in the contemporary Latin American Church in keeping with the preferential option of the poor and their liberation is the formation of thousands of Basic Christian communities all over Latin America which received considerable attention in Puebla.

113 Ibid., no.1209.
114 Ibid., no.1141-43.
115 Ibid., no.31; 32-40 describes the various faces poverty takes on.
Basic Christian Communities

Basic Christian Community (BCC)\textsuperscript{116} is a form of ecclesial experience of recent origin in the Latin American Church. BCCs have become the heart and soul of contemporary pastoral action almost throughout the land, so much so one cannot talk about pastoral activity there without mentioning the BCCs.

The universal ecclesial community, the visible means of salvation, has taken various local forms down the centuries, among which the most important thus far has been the diocese and parish. But, of late in Latin America it has assumed the form of BCC. It has become the basic unit of the Church in many parts of Latin America. And yet it is something totally different from the parish in structure and functioning. It is not the parish, not even formal constituents of it, neither is it a denial of parish; it is simply another kind of ecclesial expression.\textsuperscript{117}

BCCs are small and homogenous neighbourhood communities naturally formed usually in response to some felt need. They are first and foremost communities, i.e., dynamic units of persons who

\textsuperscript{116} In Spanish it is known as comunidad eclesial de base. The English translations, Basic Ecclesial Community, Basic Christian community, Grassroots Christian Community, etc. do not convey the full meaning of the Spanish term. But translating it as Basic Ecclesiastical Community would give it a different connotation. It would imply a juridical or canonical organization within the institutional Church, which it is not, though it maintains some relation with the parish or diocese.

\textsuperscript{117} P. Jose Marinas, "Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) in Latin America", in LADOC, Basic Christian Communities (Washington D.C.), Keyhole Series no.14 (1976), p.1.
have common needs, aspirations, experiences, purposes etc., whose bonds and solidarity are strengthened through spontaneous social and spiritual interactions. They are usually small groups of people living together in a locality sharing the same conditions of life. They are known as basic communities because the organization is at the grassroot level, and are the bases on which the Church rests. They are ecclesial because they are communities of believers in Jesus. The members are related to one another especially through their sharing of the same faith in Jesus. 118

BCCs are spontaneous organizations by the people and for the people. A priest, a nun or a catechist may act as a catalyst or animator, but the actual organization and programmes are planned and executed by the members themselves. That does not mean that the pastor is superfluous. Besides his normal functions in the parish he can be of great help to the BCCs.

It was in the 1950s that such small groups began to take shape in Brazil, Panama and Chile. By the 1960s the term Comunidad Ecclesial de Base (BCC) was in general usage. They originated to make up, in some way for the shortage of priests and religious. Dom Agnelo Rossi, bishop of Barra do Pirau in Brazil was the pioneer in that country. As there were not enough priests and

religious to reach out to all in the vast stretches of his diocese, he selected some local lay people and trained them to be community co-ordinators. In the bishop's name they gathered the people at least once a week to keep alive their sense of being a fraternal Church community by praying together, listening to the Bible and discussing their local problems.

In the 1950s, the Natal Movement was launched in Northern Brazil, with hundreds of radio schools whose goal was "educate for change". It soon spread to other dioceses and in 1961 the Basic Education Movement (MEB) was launched under the joint auspices of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops and the Brazilian Ministry of Education. This required formation of small cells or communities. MEB recruited its cadres mostly from Catholic Action such as JEC, JUC, and JOA which were all politically radicalized by 1962, and Paulo Freire was its methodological mentor. MEB carried on programmes of conscientization and politicization alongside the literary programmes. In 1962, the Brazilian Bishops launched an emergency plan to revitalize the Church. After the imposition of the military regime in 1969, MEB was practically dismantled. In 1965, the Brazilian bishops approved the first joint pastoral plan as guidelines for pastoral action. The CNBB put its weight behind in the awakening of the new social consciousness and involvement of the laity in the life of the Church. There came about a realignment or polarization in society as well as in the Church. Some sectors of the Church joined the ruling classes while quite large sectors turned
towards the poor and oppressed. The more the ruling classes used repression the more these sectors of the Church opted for the marginalized. It was in this context that the Basic Christian Communities took shape in Brazil.¹¹⁹

In the second half of the 1960s, BCCs spread to Bolivia, Colombia, Paraguay and the Central American republics. But it was especially in countries where repression was more pronounced that the BCCs acquired some socio-political dimensions, besides the religious ones.

The BCCs are not the result of an international project. Mostly they were spontaneous formations. So they do not have pre-set common objectives and programmes except in a very general sense. There are no constitutions laying down objectives, rules and procedures. They are not co-ordinated at any higher level. There are meetings at diocesan and national levels in order to exchange experiences and to discuss common problems but not to organize them on diocesan and national levels.¹²⁰

However, after a certain space of time in which these communities have evolved some of their objectives and methods to attain them become apparent. What is most striking is that BCCs that have sprang up autonomously in hundreds and thousands throughout Latin America now show a commonality in their objectives and methods. Allowing for local variations the general objectives

¹¹⁹ See in this connection Dom Aldo Gerna, "How our BCC Evolved" in LADOC, n.117, pp.13-16; and Libanio, n.118, pp.2-4.

¹²⁰ For impressions about the first and second national level meetings in Brazil see "Community Life in Brazil" The Tablet (London), 8 January 1977, pp.15-19; For an account of various diocesan level Conferences in the diocese of Crateus in Northeast of Brazil see, Dom Antonio Batista Fragoso, "History of the Church of Crateus", LADOC (Washington D.C.), Vol.IV, no.16, December 1973.
that are apparent are a desire to be a new type of Church, more evangelistic and more liberating than sacramentalizing, and fostering communitarian relationships. BCCs identify themselves with the struggles of the people against poverty and all other forms of oppression, and with the hope of the marginalized in the creation of a new society as God has planned it to be. They impart a liberating education for conscientization and promotion of human-kind.  

Libano describes the actual formation of each BCC as follows. 

As part of their pastoral action either the clergy, religious, including women, or some lay person who had had some leadership training establish contacts with some adults of a locality who would be potential members of BCC. They act as catalyzers of the communal energies, and, probably of faith already present in the people. But, at this stage, the community, for all practical purposes, is not yet a cohesive unit. It still lacks an explicit consciousness of links that bring them together as community. They live apart from each other, with no ecclesial bonds. After, may be several visits and informal meetings, the catalysts manage to establish the first network of relationships by inviting people to community encounters. A location is established for regular community meetings, usually the home of any of the members of the locality. Gerard Cembron who has had experience with hundreds of BCCs in Brazil says that a BCC comes into existence as soon as its members gather and begin praising the Lord Jesus Christ. But,

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122 Ibid., pp.13-20.
at this stage, it is like an infant dependent on those who brought about its birth. It receives almost everything from outside: encouragement, guidance, instruction, its ministries, even material help. At this stage its activities are more spiritual in nature, such as listening to the Bible, praying together etc., than social. As it becomes aware of its community nature BCC moves on to adulthood. 123

The coming together of this small community to celebrate the Word of God and the sacraments give the faithful a place where they can express their ecclesial faith, where they can celebrate their religious life and where their theological hope and charity can be nurtured. 124 The insistence is on celebration rather than on observance of some religious rites. Reading of Scripture, creative liturgy, lively discussions leading to an awareness of what they are and what they can be. Fundamental in this experience is liberty to think, to speak, to discuss, to decide and to create.

As a result of conscientization they look deeper into the causes of their poverty and suffering and discover that they are created not by God but by humans, that they are in fact, contrary to God's intention. In their reliving of faith they discover that God has been consistently on the side of the poor and the weak. Faith is related to their concrete existence and it produces motivation for the community members to come together and unite in action against poverty.

123 Gerard Cambron, "Why Such Communities Make Good Sense", in LADOC, n.117, p.19.
The social problems the BCCs encounter revolve around land and the dominant classes in the rural areas, and work place and infrastructures in the urban areas. In order to progress the BCCs undertake activities such as forming cooperatives, buying or selling through the communities petition-signing, etc.

The BCC now passes on to the stage of adulthood. It discovers its reason for existence; the rebuilding of the world and leading it to perfection as per plan of God revealed in the Scriptures. They now understand poverty and oppression are caused by individuals as belonging to a particular class. Their struggles assume larger dimensions. It becomes a struggle against the systems that keep them marginalized, poor and oppressed. Their activities take on a wider perspective especially in their pursuit of human rights. They enter into political activism and alliances. But at all stages of development they maintain the religious dimensions, their commitment in faith that transpires them to social and political commitments. Or else, they cease to be BCCs and get assimilated into some other purely social or political movement. In the ECCs, the emphasis is for congruity between faith and real life. In this sense they may be said to have put into practice liberation theology, though many of them are not aware of it.

As a novel and progressive form of ecclesial experience the BCCs attracted the attention of many bishops in Medellin in 1968. Except for a good number of bishops from Brazil like Dom Camara and Fragosa and a few from Chile and Mexico, the practical knowledge of the working of the BCCs was scant for the rest of
the bishops. Still, they foresaw the BCCs great potential in the Church and declared:

The Christian base community is the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus, which on its own grassroots level must make itself responsible for the richness and expansion of faith, as well as of the cult which is its expression. This community becomes then the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization, and it currently serves as the most important source of human advancement and development. 125

With the endorsement received from the bishops assembled in Medellin, the BCCs began to spread rapidly throughout Latin America and especially in those countries where political repression was severest as in Brazil, and in Chile after 1973. Though no precise statistics are available for Latin America as a whole the information available in some such centres as IDOC (Rome) and Lèbret (Paris) indicate that there are as many as eighty thousand BCCs in Brazil alone and about two hundred thousand for entire Latin America.

The authoritarian and repressive regimes and the conservative sectors of the Church do not look on the BCCs with favour. 126 As the latter began to engage themselves in the promotion of human rights they became targets of repression. But since they were part of the Church and protected by it, any large scale attack on the BCCs would amount to a frontal attack on the Church itself.


126 The bugaboo of Communism is seen in the BCCs as in every other progressive Catholic Movement. See "Are Basic Communities Marxist?" LADOC (Washington D.C.), Vol.VI, no.6c, November/December 1975, pp.16-18.
which these regimes are careful to avoid. Though many individuals associated with the BCCs were attacked there has not been any concerted attempt in any country to wipe out the BCCs.

Moreover, the BCCs have gained acclamation and approval in international Church forums. In the Roman Synod of Bishops of 1974 which dealt with "Evangelization in Modern World" many Latin American bishops who had the novel experience of evangelization through the BCCs spoke enthusiastically about them. They received considerable support from the participants as indicated by the reports of the Synod. 127 The subsequent apostolic letter of Pope Paul VI Evangelii Nuntiandi (1974) contained acclamation for the basic ideas of BCC. 128

However, as the BCCs were not to the liking of the conservative sectors in the Church it received scant treatment in the Preparatory Consultative Document. Despite the fact that BCCs had proved to be one of the most successful forms of evangelization in Latin America the Document whose theme itself was evangelization devoted just eleven lines referring to the BCCs. 129

127 See "Conclusiones de los grupos linguísticos del Sinodo de los Obispos de 1974" in CELAM ed., Medellin, teología pastoral para America Latina (Bogota, 1975), p.251 ff; See also "Basic Communities in the Church" Pro Mundl Vite (Brussels) Bulletin no.62 (1976).


129 Preparatory Document, para.1072-1075.
However, in the Puebla Conference itself BCC was discussed at some length. Some bishops spoke enthusiastically of BCCs. But only very few presented sufficiently full information about this novel ecclesial reality. Moreover by nature the BCCs do not lend themselves to any systematization. So, the final document does not reveal an adequate study of all the religious, social and theological dimensions of the BCCs.

Nevertheless, what the document says about the BCCs helps future pastoral activity and for the building up of the communitarian element in the Church. After describing how the BCCs as communities bring together people in "an intimate interpersonal relationship grounded in faith" and as "an ecclesial reality, in a community of faith, hope, and charity" the document further adds:

United in a CEB (BCC) and nurturing their adherence to Christ, Christians strive for a more evangelical way of life amid the people, work together to challenge the egotistical and consumeristic roots of society, and make explicit their vocation to communion with God and their fellow humans. Thus they offer a valid and worthwhile point of departure for the building up a new society. 131

The text does not really bring to the fore all the implications and potentials of the BCCs. There are passing references to BCC in some other texts. All considered the document considers them as forms of pastoral strategies while in reality it is much more than that. It embodies the pastoral dimension, in this that it is a realization of Church at the grassroots, as

131 Ibid., no.642.
being the place where Christians could hear the Word of God and celebrate it. But it necessarily implies "conversion to neighbour" and "communion with other men" which assumes radical implications when it occurs in a conflictual society. The growth of the fellowship among members of the most marginalized population leads to a heightened awareness of common suffering and collective analysis of goals, hope and failures, which in turn lead to collectively conceived solutions; and the next step, which the dictatorships and all those aligned with them fear most, collectively enacted solutions.

The BCC is not a political movement. It is essentially a religious movement, a new ecclesial experience of the faith in Jesus, but in the concrete human life which encompasses social, economic, cultural and political dimensions. In the BCC, political life is not divorced from faith rather it flows from it, and prayer life is not separated from social life. The oppression and the injustices the people are undergoing and the conflictual nature of the society in which they live are reflected in the prayers they make together. Here is one example of how they actually pray:

I pray for the Christian family. I pray for our sick and imprisoned brothers, for those of us who are suffering illness and for all those who are hungry....Lord we've had enough, Lord, of so much injustice that they commit against us poor people. We can't stand all those injustices any longer, nor all the hunger our children endure. There is nothing to buy bread with; money doesn't buy anything any more....Lord! so much injustice! 132

They do not end with prayer. With the confidence in a personal God who is always on the side of the poor and oppressed

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they set out to work for the removal of at least mitigation of the suffering of the people, sickness, unemployment, etc. Concrete actions for the promotion of human rights is one of their chief concerns.

In countries where people are denied all forms of political participation the BCCs not only nurture their aspirations for participation but even provide alternate forms of participation, albeit analogous, in what affects the community. (They also ensure peoples participation in local civil bodies to the extent possible). By nourishing critical consciousness as well as spirit of resistance and providing a sense of hope and solidarity the BCCs are proving to be nurseries of future generation of leaders and to that extent counter-productive to the efforts of the National Security regimes. Bishop Fragoso, one of the staunchest supporters of BCCs is explicit on this point. "The grass-roots Churches" he says, "are the primary school in the political struggle". He continues:

The people on account of the political system were denied the right of free expression, but in the small community they were able to discuss their situation; they could not elect their leaders on a national level, but were able to do this in the local community; they were not free to talk about national laws, but in the local community and in the municipality they did not only request this right, but actually exercised it. Today, on a national level, they realize that they must participate in a political party organized by the people. 133

The Basic Christian Communities are, probably, the most significant contribution the Latin American Church is making to the universal Catholic Church to reconstruct a Church born of the

people through the Holy Spirit, and to the Latin American society to effect an eventual return to democratic procedures, and structural transformations.

The Puebla Conference revealed that the Church as an institution has moved considerably since Medellin toward a "structural" understanding of the social problems and a widening "pastoral" commitment to the poor and oppressed. The Church has become the voice of those who have no voice, especially in the context of the wide-spread repressions. Puebla enthusiastically supported the Basic Christian Communities that have great potential in the evangelical as well as socio-political context.

The Church always has had a problem with politics. Attempts were made to resolve it by distinguishing partisan political activity, considered not appropriate for the Church, from prophetic and pastoral social activism, considered fundamental to its mission in the world. But, Puebla's broad understanding of the Church's prophetic and pastoral responsibilities make it obvious that the Church will be deeply involved in politics in the future.

The Final Document of Puebla reflects a consensus rather than a uniform conversion to any point of view. The acrimonious debates prior to the Conference, the process by which consensus was arrived at in the Conference and the document itself reveal the co-existence within the Church of divergent and at times directly opposed positions and points of view. Though a semblance of unity of the Church has been maintained, the tensions and divisions within the Church have not been really resolved.