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Review Article

Basic Christian Communities

VINCENT CULLEN, S.J.

THE CHALLENGE OF BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES. Edited by Sergio Torres and John Eagleson. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982. 280 pages.

The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities contains the papers of the International Ecumenical Congress held in Sao Paulo, Brazil from 20 February to 2 March 1980. In attendance were theologians, sociologists and church workers from various countries in Latin America, and guest delegates from Africa, Asia and North America. The title would better have been "The ecclesiology of the popular Christian communities," as expressed in the theme of the congress, because most of the papers deal with the ecclesiology of liberation theology rather than with the Basic Christian Communities themselves.

In the book the papers are divided into five groups: 1) Christian Presence in Situations of Domination; 2) Reflections on Popular Communities; 3) Personal Experiences and Liturgies; 4) Final Documents; and 5) Evaluation and Interpretation. Since any attempt to summarize each paper would exceed the scope of this review, the main themes of each section will be briefly described.

CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN SITUATIONS OF DOMINATION

This section deals with two main themes: the situation of dependence and exploitation in Latin American countries, and the plight of minority groups — women, Indian tribes and blacks of Central and South America. These two themes manifest different sociological perspectives. The first places emphasis on the socioeconomic exploitation of Latin American nations by Western capitalism. The second refers to cultural domination

within the Latin American nations themselves. Luis A. Gomes de Souza of Brazil presents a socioeconomic analysis of Third World oppression, and Miguel Concha of Mexico opts for socioeconomic classes, as the basis for unity in the struggle for liberation. This is a Marxist approach with both its strengths and weaknesses.

On the other side, papers on Latin American women by Cora Ferro of Costa Rica and two papers by several authors, one on "Indigenous Mobilization and the Theology of Liberation," and one entitled "The Situation of the Black Race in Latin America and the Caribbean," deal with the oppression of minority groups in Latin American countries and thus challenge the Marxist notion of class struggle as the only basis for the struggle for liberation. Basically this is a conflict between a strict Marxist view and one based more on race and culture. The writers for the minority groups accuse the Marxists of preaching liberation while practising racial and cultural oppression.

A third theme emerges in the paper of Juan Hernandez Pico of Nicaragua entitled, "The Experience of Nicaragua's Revolutionary Christians." The question raised in this paper is whether the alliance between Christians and unbelievers in the revolutionary struggle is merely tactical or something deeper, thus the problem of the relationship between Marxist social theory and practice and Christian values and practice. Pico himself tends to take the Marxist position: "Revolutionary commitment and correct objective analysis of reality were the only criteria used to identify true militants and collaborators in the struggle for Nicaragua's liberation" (p. 63). He proceeds to another debatable assertion: "Within the framework of this study it is necessary to investigate how religion serves as a spur or a brake to the revolutionary process. But there is no room in such a strategy for saying that revolutionary politics and religion are incompatible" (p. 63). In a last quote, Pico gives a description of Christianity that might not be acceptable to most Christians to say nothing of the institutional Church:

The revolutionary process could now become the maximum Christian value because it represented the one and only approximation to the maximum, absolute value of the kingdom. In a word, the revolution was the historical version of the food given to the hungry and the cup of water given to the thirsty person. So the revolution, as the high road to the new human being and the new society, became a cause that gave meaning to life. (p. 68)

Here may be seen at least one of the seeds of the present conflict between the Church and the Sandinista regime — the reduction of the Christian vision to the merely historical and economic order and its instrumentalization to fit the requirements of the revolutionary government.

REFLECTIONS ON POPULAR COMMUNITIES

This section consists of papers specifically on the nature of Basic Christian Communities and papers on the ecclesiology underlying the Basic Christian Communities. Here as in the first part there appears the difference between the real and the speculative approaches. Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru in his excellent paper, "Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People" gives a clear exposition of the nature of the Basic Christian Communities as the living Church in the midst of the struggle of the Latin American poor for an active voice in the decisions that govern their lives.

Carlos Mesters of Brazil delivers a good practical lesson on the use of the Bible in Christian communities, and gives the reader one of the few examples in which the people are allowed to speak for themselves.

The theologians say that reality is a *locus theologicus*. The people say 'God speaks, mixed into things.' A thinker described the Church in this way: 'The Church is us, exchanging ideas with each other to discover the idea of the Holy Spirit in the people.' If it hadn't come from Antonio Pascual I would have said it came from St. Augustine. (p. 205)

There then follows a short paper by Miguel d'Escoto, M. M., of Nicaragua, describing the Nicaraguan Church formed through the struggle against the Somoza regime and characterized by solidarity and paschal joy.

Most of the papers of this section deal with the ecclesiology of the theology of liberation. Enrique Dusserl of Mexico provides a clear account of the ecclesiastical history from 1972 to 1980 and the relationship of these ecclesiastical events to the secular events of the time. There follow three papers on the ecclesiology of liberation theology; "Theological Characteristics of a Grassroots Church" by Leonardo Boff, O.F.M., of Brazil; "Fundamental Questions in Ecclesiology" by Jose Miguez Bonino of Argentina, and "Ecclesiology in Latin America" by Ronaldo Muñoz of Chile. Boff's heavy-handed attempt to describe Church activities in Marxist categories, such as titling one section, "Characteristics of the Church under the Dissymmetrical Mode of Religious Production" detracts from an otherwise thoughtful paper.

The high point of this section is the paper of Juan Sobrino of El Salvador entitled "Witness of the Church in Latin America." Sobrino, more than any other author, manages to combine deep theological insights with the realities of the common people, and his paper is refreshingly free of ideological baggage. He quotes an early missionary to South America, Bartolome de las Casas: "He [Casas] described the Indian as a poor and oppressed creature rather than as an infidel. And so he drew his famous conclusion; 'Better a live non-believing Indian than a dead Christian Indian' " (p. 165). From this point Sobrino makes clear that the much debated Church option for the poor is not an option at all, since the term option indicates that there is another

acceptable choice. Sobrino insists that it is not an option but a demand of the Gospel. He bases his argument on the fact that the true God is the God of life and not of death and that any people, institution or structure depriving the people of life worships a false god, the god of death. Apart from this objective witness of the Church, he speaks of subjective witness, that is the people suffering and dying in the struggle for life, and thus touches on the difficult question of witness to life and participation in armed struggle:

The second thing is more directly of interest to us here, because it concerns the kind of holiness that might be displayed even in and through armed insurrection. On the one hand it is clear that by its very nature an insurrection can produce dehumanizing, sinful forces, e.g. hatred, vengefulness, disproportionate violence or sheer terrorism. If on the other hand, people can get beyond the mad craving typical of armed struggle, the struggle itself can give rise to a series of Christian values, e.g. fortitude, generosity, forgiveness, and magnanimity in victory. Thus it is possible that armed struggle itself, when it is inevitable and just, can be a vehicle of holiness; life sacrificed in it can also be regarded as witness to love in fuller experience. (p. 177)

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND LITURGIES

This is a brief section, but does contain a prayer of the faithful, which is very powerful. The prayer consists of reading out the names of those who have died in witness to the Gospel, to which the congregation answers, "Present."

FINAL DOCUMENTS

This section consists of the Final Document of the Congress and a Letter to Other Nations of the Third World. The final document of the Congress is a long one (pp. 231-46), and does not merely summarize the themes of the congress papers, but is more a summary statement on liberation theology and its application in Basic Christian Communities. While it does not admit the charges made by the minority groups, that it has shared in the oppression of minority groups at least by its silence, it does mention that these groups should be included in the process. It might be worthwhile for the reader, to read this Document before reading the document papers, in order to get a sense of the whole Congress.

In the "Letter to Christians in Popular Christian Communities and Regions of the World," there emerges the basic Marxist bias which underlies many of the papers. The following may serve as an illustration of this:

We have also seen that the principle cause of this injustice is to be sought in the capitalist system, which like a new tower of Babel (Gen. 4, 10) raises itself over the world and controls the life of the poor, favoring a few who constantly get richer at the expense of the growing poverty of others. This is why the impoverished peoples of our countries live in real captivity within their own lands. (p. 247)

EVALUATION AND INTERPRETATION

This last section contains brief papers by Asians, North American Blacks and Hispanics who criticize the Latin American theologians for their rigid adherence to Marxist principles and their lack of interest in the liberation of the cultural and ethnic groups in their midst. Tisa Balasiriya of Sri Lanka brings up the problem of land for the landless, in that while many East Asian nations are vastly overcrowded, many South American "white" nations are unwilling to open their borders to them. Alfred Reed of Jamaica, speaking of Liberation Theology and minority groups in Latin America, asks these questions:

These are people. And no doubt they have made their contribution. But are you convinced that the church has really learned from them? Have you in your very impressive pastoral strategy and in your basic Christian communities made absolutely sure that manipulation of the people, imposition and alienating ideologies are brought under the rule of justice, respect and human liberation? Are the people the real subjects of their history? Or are they once more the objects of history? (p. 263)

Cornel West of the U.S., speaking of Marxist analysis in Latin American theology, notes: "When Marxists are preoccupied with an analysis that downplays or ignores the liberating aspects of degraded and oppressed cultures, it suggests that such Marxists share the ethos, not of the degraded and oppressed minorities, but of the dominant European culture" (p. 256). Rivimbo Tekere of Zimbabwe makes the same point: "As Latin Americans evolve a new theology or a new definition of theology — that of liberation — they cannot afford to overlook one of the greatest obstacles that has kept the poor from the Christian church; the obstacle of cultural oppression" (p. 258).

To sum up, those interested in Liberation Theology and the Basic Christian Communities will find in this book a valuable summary of those topics. Thus the Latin American Theology of Liberation appears with its valuable insights and deficiencies as pointed out by the non-Latin American delegates. However, as a theological perspective for the whole world, the excessive use of the Marxist approach robs the theology of liberation both of objectivity and Catholicity, in that while the main cause of structural oppression

in Latin America is clearly international capitalism, this is not so in other Third World Countries. To pass in silence over the oppression of the Church in China and Vietnam, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, and Christian Martyrs of Zimbabwe and other African states, robs the theological movement of much of its credibility in other Third World countries, including the Philippines, where military abuses are regularly exposed and rightly condemned, but the tortures and liquidations of the New People's Army are passed over in silence. The Lord has told us that "The Truth shall make you free" (J 8:32), and this must be a truth unbiased by ideology, if theology of liberation is to help bring about true liberation to the people.