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servants of God's word. For we continue to believe that only in this way is Christ allowed to be the Lord of the Church and salvation seen as God's gracious offer to all people.

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Base Ecclesial Communities in the Brazilian Catholic Church: A Study of Re-Evangelization and Growth

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Possibly the most exciting item of missiological news to come out of Latin America these days cannot be found in the journals of most Protestant mission organizations. It has to do with the *comunidades eclesiais de base*¹ or base ecclesial communities, the fastest-growing movement within the Roman Catholic Church. *Time* magazine (May 7, 1979, p.88) called it the most influential Catholic movement in Latin America, where there may be as many as 150,000 *comunidades*—80,000 of them in Brazil. A prominent sociologist, in a Smithsonian Institution symposium, states that these "grass-roots congregations" promise to change the face of Brazilian Catholicism into the nation's first truly working-class association. He goes on to liken this phenomenon to eighteenth-century Wesleyanism (IDOC 1978:78–84).

What is the nature of, this movement? What are its social and historical roots and its fundamental characteristics? And what is its significance for both Catholic and Protestant mission today? I have approached these issues with several concerns: (1) as a Christian who is deeply concerned about total human liberation; (2) as a Protestant who has been engaged in mission in Latin America for over a quarter century; (3) as an evangelical missiologist who is committed to holistic evangelization and church growth; and (4) as an inquisitive student of social and religious phenomena.

DEFINITION

The base ecclesial communities constitute a dynamic movement that defies easy definition. The 1968 Medellín Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM II) called them "the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus ... the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization ... the most important source of human advancement and

¹ I am using the Portuguese spelling throughout; Spanish: *comunidades eclesiales de base*.

development" (CELAM II:201). The 1979 Puebla Conference (CELAM III) called the *comunidades* "an expression of the Church's preferential love for the poor ... the focal point of evangelization, the motor of liberation."

CELAM III defined "community" as "intimate personal relationship in the faith". "Ecclesial" suggests the church-relatedness of these communities through the celebration of the Word and of the sacraments. But, above all, it is the church "putting into practice the Word of God" and making "present and active the church's mission". Finally, the *comunidades* are "of the base" because they are germinal cells in the wider parish community.²

What sets the Brazilian base ecclesial communities apart from other superficially similar movements are their origins. They have not been imported from abroad. Nor are they communities that have been created by ecclesiastical fiat as part of some predetermined strategy for church renewal and re-evangelization. They are grassroots communities, spontaneously in response to the Latin American reality, and of which the church was virtually forced to take cognizance.

The church gradually became aware of the existence of "natural communities (neighbourhood associations, youth clubs, workers' cells, etc.) ... local and environmental, which correspond to the reality of a homogenous group and whose size allows for personal fraternal contact amongst its members." Having discovered these "homogenous units," the church determined to orient its pastoral efforts "toward the transformation of these communities into 'a family of God.'" It tried to do this by making itself present among them "as leaven" by means of a small nucleus. The *comunidade* "creates a community of faith, hope and charity which takes seriously and at the same time challenges the 'homogenous units' which are at the base of society" (CELAM 11:201).

SOCIO-HISTORICAL ROOTS

The transition from a traditional and semipagan institution that for almost 500 years had been allied with the rich and powerful to a Church that is beginning to return to the poor did not happen as the result of a sudden change of heart. The social and political and religious determinants from the time of the discovery of Brazil by the Portuguese until the mid-nineteenth century were the royal patronage system, which controlled the Church, and the *fazenda*, or system of large plantations with slaves and, after 1888, indentured labour.

Governmental changes from royal colony (1500) to independent empire (1822) and republic (1889) did not alter these facts. *Fazendeiro* and plantation chaplain, African slaves and mulatto and mestizo "free men" were all part of an overarching *patron*-dependent relationship to which the Church, with only a few exceptions, gave its blessing. This relationship did not change when feudalism was supplanted by industrialism, setting in motion the vast peasant migrations to the cities and the rise of the festering *favelas* (Freyre 1964:30f.,390f.; 1968:26,95; De Kadt 1970:10–50).

The ecclesiastical fact of life during the first 489 years of Brazilian history was "regalism"—the control of the Church by the crown: the direct result of the royal patronage granted the Iberian monarchs by the Pope. When Rome regained control of the Brazilian Church with the proclamation of the republic, it inherited a weakened and venal institution that had all but lost the allegiance of the masses. While the Church basked in the reflected

² Quotations are from a rough translation of the final Puebla document done by some of the journalists who were present.

glory of the crown, it evidenced small awareness and concern over this fact. Forced to stand upon its own feet, the Church discovered the virtual nonexistence of its own bases (De Kadt 1970:53f.; Bruneau 1974:11–29). During this period several Protestant denominations began to appear on the Brazilian scene.

The indigenous population and the African peoples who were transferred wholesale into Brazilian slavery were superficially “Christianized”. They were allowed by their masters to practice their animistic rites in secret because this “facilitated the civilizing process and aided in the disciplining of the slaves” (Freyre 1964:328). Afro-Brazilian Spiritism—and recent Pentecostal growth—can be explained in part as a reaction of the masses against the social, economic, cultural, and religious exploitation by the feudal *fazenda* and ecclesiastical systems.

During the first half of this century the Church attempted to recoup its losses through an alliance of convenience with an anticlerical populist dictatorship. The political ferment and growing popular discontent during the presidencies that followed gradually forced the Church into contact with the exploited masses, and numerous radical Catholic movements came into being. Two of the most important for our study were Catholic Action (AC) and the Movimento de Educacao de Base (MEB).³ The MEB was born from the Church’s increasing awareness of the plight of the peasants and out of its unease over Marxist successes. The basic techniques used by the MEB—Paulo Freire’s *conscientizacao* (consciousness raising) and nondirective group dynamics—have been refined in *comunidade de base* methodology (Bruneau 1974:30–104; De Kadt 1970:34–105; LADOC: Vol. 2, April 1972, and Vol. 6, Sept.–Oct. 1975).

The violent reaction of the landholder-industrialist-military alliance to the threat of a radicalized Catholicism culminated in the military *revolucao* of 1964, and in the eventual demise of the MEB as a prophetic movement. However, the prophetic voices and actions of the progressive priests and bishops who supported this movement led to an escalating confrontation between Church and State. Events have placed the Brazilian hierarchy in the forefront of the struggle for re-evangelization and human rights in Brazil and Latin America (Bruneau 1974:127–65; De Kadt 1970:177–211).

Official Catholic documents and pronouncements after Vatican Council II gave the Brazilian progressives in the hierarchy the doctrinal underpinning for their actions. Gradually, for the sake of institutional solidarity, an increasing number of bishops have been forced to define their position vis-à-vis the *revolucao*’s doctrine of national security. This doctrine subsumes, at whatever human cost, personal and collective civil rights to the security and economic well-being of the state (LADOC Keyhole Series, no. 8:1–5; *Pro Mundi Vita*: Dossier 1977; IDOC:14–29: 43–45).

The “Brazilian economic miracle” has, by the government’s own statistics (1978), resulted only in widening the gap between the rich and the poor. As they struggled to help the poor of Brazil to understand the meaning of the Catholic faith, the clergy were confronted with two aspects of the same reality: (a) socio-economic injustice and (b) Christo-pagan popular religiosity. This twin reality has shaped the Church’s approach to base community praxis.

FUNDAMENTAL ORIENTATIONS

³ Dom Hélder Câmara and several of his “radical” and progressive colleagues were early militants in the ranks of the AC.

The significance of the *comunidades de base* for Christian missiology can be found in four orientations, which set the *comunidades* apart from both traditional Catholicism and other basic Christian communities in Latin America.

First, Reality with a capital *R* is the operative word in the Brazilian *comunidades*. The ingredients of this Reality are the context of poverty, injustice, and marginalization in which the majority of Brazilians find themselves. *Comunidade* members have begun to discover that this Reality is not a divine “given”. They are seeking to understand this Reality not so they can accommodate themselves to it, but in order to be able to change it as part of their Christian responsibility. Both Scripture and a critical socio-economic analysis—which draws from several sources, including the writings of Brazilian theologians Leonardo Boff and Carlos Mesters—serve as tools for the unmasking of this Reality.⁴ Reality is also the nominality of the masses, which must be re-evangelized with the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Second, the *comunidades eclesiais de base* have arisen more or less spontaneously in response to Brazilian Reality. The interpretation of the ecclesial Reality of the *comunidades* will vary depending upon whether it is being seen from the vantage point of the hierarchy or from the perspective of the *comunidade* leaders. On the part of the latter, the Church is the people of God, composed of all those who have been baptized. It has been called to be a servant community. But the Church all too often has been unfaithful to this commission. According to Father José Marins, Latin American coordinator of the movement, the base ecclesial communities are a faithful pilgrim remnant—what Dom Hélder Câmara has called “Abrahamic minorities” (Câmara 1976:78)—within the larger nominal Church and in the structures and institutions of society. This *koinonia* admits of no anonymous Christianity (despite the movement’s theological indebtedness at some points to Karl Rahner).

Sin and salvation, while affecting the individual person, are understood in the *comunidades* more in corporate and structural terms. Conversion is a process. The community of faith is constantly “being converted” to God in Christ through the Church, to the Word and through the neighbour. These are the instruments that God uses to confront us with Reality.

The *comunidade* leaders see their movement as a reordering from the bottom up of the millennial structures of the Church. The Church is no longer seen as a pyramid with the Pope at the top, but as a circle in which every member, including the hierarchy and the humblest Christian, has a ministry which has been given to him or her by the Holy Spirit. In contrast, other Catholic observers tend to see the movement as one of several expressions of the one Church, including the traditional territorial Church, the charismatic renewal, the neocatechumenate, marriage encounter, and others.

Reality is also liturgical, because it is in the Eucharist that the christological and ecclesial centre of the Gospel becomes most evident to members of the *comunidades*. During the “celebration” every aspect of the austere liturgy focuses upon the significance of our Lord’s passion for the Reality which the *comunidade* members experience daily. It is a call to *marturia*, because more than fifty *comunidade* leaders have already been murdered or have disappeared in Latin America. Others have been harassed, imprisoned, and tortured.

Third, the base community understanding of social and ecclesial reality is the starting point for a new “hermeneutic of the people,” or a “theology of the base”. The point of departure of this theology is not a corpus of abstract dogma but the Reality of poverty,

⁴ Marxist analysis has contributed less to Brazilian *comunidade de base* reflection than in some Spanish American countries.

marginalization, injustice, and alienation which surrounds them. It is “the view from the base”—Scripture reread in community from the bottom up. Biblical themes, which have traditionally been interpreted from the optic of the rich and powerful, are now seen through the eyes of the poor and oppressed. Theology, then, becomes “a reflection upon praxis” by the oppressed leading to concrete actions toward their own liberation.

It is a contextualized theology, in the sense that the base communities are theologizing in their own context of poverty and oppression. Contextualization in this case does not mean functional accommodation to the dominant culture. This is a dysfunctional and prophetic contextualization, which challenges dehumanizing cultural norms. The “prophetic discontinuity” of this theology can be seen in the Bible study materials that have grown out of base community reflection (cf. Mesters 1973; Gorgulho 1975; Marins 1978).

Fourth, the *comunidades de base* reflection upon their own social and ecclesial Reality in the light of biblical Reality has led to a new understanding of the Church’s mission. The proclamation of the Gospel—in word and action—is both the *announcement* of salvation and liberation in Jesus Christ and the *denouncement* of everything that oppresses and alienates humanity (cf. Marins 1976b, 1977c, 1977e; Barreiro 1977). It is both re-evangelization of the masses of nominal Christians and prophetic confrontation with the oppressive “powers”. In the words of a Brazilian bishop, “the *comunidades* are the theology of liberation put into practice” (*Time*, May 7, 1979, p.88).

QUESTIONS FROM AN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE

It is a temptation for the evangelical Protestant to want to impose his or her own understanding of Reality (social, ecclesial, and biblical) upon the Catholic base ecclesial communities. This is a temptation we must avoid if we truly believe in the incarnation of the Gospel into different Realities. Neither can we evaluate the base communities according to our understanding of traditional Roman Catholic Reality. The *comunidades de base* cannot be fully appreciated or objectively critiqued from our own comfortable ivory towers. Incarnation into base community Reality will give us both the experience and the right to make critical observations. Nonetheless, I would suggest four questions that should be asked of the base communities by any student of the movement.

1. Is the *comunidades de base* understanding of Reality complete? Does it deal as adequately with personal sin as it does with institutional sin? Does it give as much weight to sin as transgression against God as it does to sin against neighbour? In what way does the “lostness” of humanity before God relate on one’s intra- and interpersonal alienation?

2. Do the base communities deal adequately with popular religiosity? Granting the need to rediscover and to preserve the liberating cultural and social values of “a religion of the people,” is there not also a need for prophetic denunciation (and exorcism) of the demonic elements in Spiritism and in popular religion?

3. What is the ultimate source of authority for the *comunidades de base*? Is it the Church, socio-economic Reality, or Scripture? In what way do these sources relate to the authority of the Trinity?

4. Does the Catholic *comunidades* concept of conversion-as-a-process exhaust the biblical understanding of conversion? Protestants can indeed be grateful for this counterbalancing of their own emphasis upon conversion-as-a-point-in-time-event. But at what point in the process does conversion-as-an-about-face—as *metanoia*, as turning “to God from idols ... from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God”—take place?

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROTESTANT MISSION

The Catholic *comunidades de base* have profound implications for Protestant mission in Brazil and Spanish America. Virtually all Protestant churches now working in Brazil can trace their roots to base ecclesial communities. The Scottish Covenanters had their outlawed conventicles and the Anabaptists had their persecuted communities. British congregationalism was a grassroots community movement, as were the Methodist “classes”—and the Moravian communities and Society of Friends groups, which work elsewhere in Latin America. The *colegia pietatis* or *ecclesiola in ecclesia* of Francke and Spener have their descendants in some of the Lutheran movements in Brazil. Indigenous Pentecostalism, which accounts for more than two-thirds of Brazilian Protestantism, began as a base church movement.

Yet most Protestant churches today are afraid of the very base church movements that gave them birth. Some churches appear to be more concerned about attaining and maintaining a dubious respectability, even in the face of institutionalized injustice and violence, than in speaking out in defense of fundamental human freedoms. Religious “liberty”—“freedom to preach the Gospel”—takes precedence over other freedoms. Said Father José Marins, after he had been shown the large “cathedral” being built by a Pentecostal pastor, “We are coming from where you are going.” Latin American Protestants are being challenged to consider the possibility that the evangelization of Catholic Latin America may take place, at least in part, within the Catholic Church, and to search for ways in which Protestants can relate to this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, the *comunidades de base* present their greatest challenge to their own Church. They challenge it, as we have seen, at the levels of sociology, ecclesiology, theology, and mission. How will a church, which is one of the wealthiest, most centralized, and traditional institutions on earth, respond to this challenge from a Church of the poor?

The final document of Puebla, despite its ambivalence at several points, accepts this challenge to its “personal and institutional behaviour”. Quoting from Paul VI, CELAM III defined evangelization in terms of the totality of human needs: “Evangelization will not be complete until there takes place dialogue ... between the Gospel and the personal and social lives of people in the concrete.” Evangelization “must keep the whole man and all men before its eyes and must communicate to them suitably and adequately a particular vigorous message in our time on liberation ... always in the context of the global plan of salvation” (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 29, 38).

The foundational pillars of this evangelization, according to John Paul II, are “the truth about Jesus Christ ... about the Church ... about man.” If these foundations are taken seriously by the hierarchy and the *comunidades de base* leadership, the movement will continue to grow and to fulfil its promise as “a hope (and possibly the hope) of the Church” (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 58).

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The Kingdom, The Church and a Distressed World

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