

BOFF, Leonardo, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1986, US\$9.95.

Ecclesiogenesis is an exciting, but ultimately unsatisfying, book. It is exciting, because it tells of the new understanding of the church that lies behind the birth of base Christian communities in Brazil, and elsewhere in South America, but it is unsatisfying because it fails to consider objections to this new vision of the church, or to give a systematic reflection on the theological issues at stake. Like too many contemporary publications, the volume under review is a collection of papers originally written separately. It is far from being a fully-developed ecclesiology.

Boff argues that the universal church is rendered visible in the local ecclesial community. As a community of faith, united to Christ, believers are the presence of universal church. In other words, the base communities of South America can claim to be the church in its fullness. Ministry does not give the right to rule over the church. It is not the bishops and priests who call the church into being, but the Holy Spirit, who gives each person gifts to use in building up the common life of the body of Christ. There is equality between all Christians, with the ordained ministers having the function of serving their brothers and sisters and of preserving the church's unity.

The advantage of Boff's model of the church is that it understands the importance of lay participation, and gets away from the old division between clerical producers and lay consumers. The weakness is that it all too easily leads to parochialism, or to control over the local Christian community by certain dominating personalities, who lack an adequate theological formation. The base community needs to be linked to the wider body of Christ. How does Boff envisage this relationship?

The discussion of the political aspects of the gospel follows a pattern familiar from the works of other South American theologians of liberation. Capitalism is criticised (with good reason, given the suffering it has brought to countries like Chile), but there is no assessment of the weaknesses of Marxism. What would Boff say to the people of Ethiopia, who were forced to starve as a result of their Marxist government's land reform and resettlement programme from 1984-1985? In many parts of Africa, so-called socialist governments are forcing down agricultural prices

(and so depressing production) in order to provide cheap food for the towns, and so prevent rioting and discontent.

Perhaps most disappointing of all is Boff's discussion of whether lay people can celebrate the Eucharist for the base communities. His conclusion appears to be that they can, since it is the one who presides over the community who should stand at the altar, whether he/she is ordained or not, but then we are told that the use of lay celebrants would represent an extraordinary state of affairs, and that the services in which they take part should be called "the Lord's Supper", not the Mass! To be honest, I find this an extraordinary argument that appears to want things both ways. It may have been devised with an eye to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but the result is confused, and likely to satisfy no one.

The case for confining the celebration of the Eucharist to ordained ministers is not that only they have the special power that enables them to confect the body and blood of Christ, but that, in this way, the unity of the church is symbolised and maintained. Given the shortage of vocations to the priesthood, the Catholic church in South America clearly has a crisis on its hands, but the way to solve it is not to invent a new service half-way between an agape and a Eucharist. If the obstacle of compulsory celibacy could be overcome, a better solution could be found.

A final paper puts the case for the ordination of women. Boff is all for equality between men and women, but he also recognises that a genuine liberation for women would set them free to be truly feminine. In the light of this, he does get as far as wondering whether women should be encouraged to function as priests in the way that men have traditionally done so. Might there not be an argument here for saying that women and men are called upon to exercise fundamentally different, but complementary, roles in the church? This is not a line of inquiry that Boff pursues. For most of the time he repeats that familiar case for the ordination of women to the priesthood.

To end on a positive note, I liked Boff's stress on the priest as a *representative* who acts to make visible the priestly ministry of Christ. It is Christ who baptises, absolves, and consecrates, but He does so through the mediation of the ordained minister, who has been given the authority to celebrate publicly in the name of Christ and of the Christian community. If

this position is taken seriously, it must surely lead us to see that the ministry does not spring from among believers, but is, in fact, Christ's gift to His church.

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COOK, Guillermo, *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective*, American Society of Missiology Series No. 9, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1985, US\$13.95, 316 pp.

This book provides rich information on the situation in Latin America: oppressed Christians, who seek to understand and respond to their concrete problems in the light of scriptures. The author takes a firm stand. The study is a challenge to Cook himself, to Protestantism, to the Roman Catholic church, and for Mission. Cook calls himself an evangelical of very conservative stock (p. 5). He sees the Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEB) as a new reality. Keywords of this reality are poverty, alienation, marginalisation, oppression. "The poor are refusing to give up their own future. This is why I called the CEB 'the Expectation of the Poor'" (p. 7). The CEB are a challenge to Protestantism: "Protestantism is a creative protest", called the Protestant Principle (Foreword, p. xiii). He sees a similarity with "the revolt of CEB against institutional fossilisation – the systemic rigidity and theological sterility that gripped the Catholic church for more than a millennium-and-a-half of its history" (p. 3). The Catholic Comunidades are a "Protestant" phenomenon. But, ironically, the Protestant churches are not "Protestant" any more, because they have become institutionalised. The priesthood of all believers has become a theoretical doctrine, and, unlike, a church of the poor, they are a middle-class prosperous establishment. "The Saviour that was proclaimed . . . by Protestants . . . was not, in every case, the suffering servant of scripture" (p. 204). Therefore, the CEB are more "Protestant" than Protestant churches, and Protestant CEB have been institutionalised. "The spirit of prophetic criticism against every kind of absolutism . . . implicit in the 'Protestant Principle' is evident in the ethos of the Comunidades" (p. 236). "We seem to be passing the Catholic church – or a certain segment of it – but in the wrong direction" (p. 8). "We are passing each other in the night" (p. 235).