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Close to God and Close to the Poor

The Anniversary of Vaticanum II in Latin America

German Version

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Talking about the anniversary of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America means to remember the event of the Council in its historical impact. But should the Council be celebrated at all in view of the challenges faced today by the Latin American continent?

Apart from Latin America, there is probably no other local church where a comparably creative reception of the Second Vatican Council took place - with a sweeping impact for a whole continent. Already before Vaticanum II there was a new exchange between the Latin American Bishops, due to the creation of the Latin American Episcopal Council CELAM (Consejo episcopal latinoamericano). The first conference took place 1955 in Rio de Janeiro. The 'event' Council (1962-1965) and the many opportunities to meet each other in commissions and working sessions intensified this exchange. It was chaired by charismatic and far-sighted people such as the Chilean Bishop **Manuel Larraín** of Talca, president of CELAM

during the Vaticanum II and **Hélder Câmara**, who was since the Rio Conference longtime Secretary of CELAM.

Many of the Latin American bishops who took part in the Council belonged to the group "Church of the Poor." Since the beginning of Vaticanum II it was formed at the initiative of Cardinal **Giacomo Lercaro** and by bishops who were connected with the spirituality of **Charles de Foucauld**, as e.g. **Archbishop Hakim** from Galilee and **Bishop Charles Himmer** (Tournai/Belgium). A large part of them signed at the end of the Council the so-called "[Catacomb Pact](#)": **Méndez Arceo**(Cuernavaca/ Mexico), **Samuel Ruíz** (San Cristobal de las Casas/Mexico),**Leonidas Proaño** (Riobamba/Ecuador), **Aloisio Lorscheider** (Santo Angelo, then Fortaleza/Brazil), **Silva Henríquez** (Santiago de Chile).

At the end of Vaticanum II, Bishop Manuel Larraín had still initiated a second General Assembly of CELAM and obtained Paul VI's consent for it. On the way to this conference, which was held in 1968 in Medellín, and in its wake - it was further interpreted by Aloisio Lorscheider and **Eduardo F. Pironio** after the untimely death of Larraín who in 1966 lost his life in a car accident near Talca - the Council became in Latin America an event that formed here a history of its own.

Medellín - not just mere Application or Extension of Vaticanum II

Talking about the anniversary of the Council in Latin America means therefore to remember the event of the Council in its historical impact.

As in hardly any other context, in Latin America from the very beginning one recognized the ecclesiological relevance of the Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et

Spes." The place of the church as a community of believers on the side of all people, especially the needy, the poor and those who are exposed to violence by different structures of injustice became the new identity marker of the Latin American Church.

The Spring that began with Vaticanum II has been Interrupted

The Conference of Medellín became the starting point for the renewal of the Church as a witness of God's kingdom in solidarity with the poor and as a servant of the Latin American peoples. By many it is also called the "Latin American Council," due to its impressive documents about justice, about pastoral care of people and about "Pastoral de conjunto" (i.e. a pastoral care that is oriented towards the local church, an integral pastoral care), about the poverty of the church, the document about peace in which all forms of institutionalized violence are condemned (No. 16), and the new theological impulses which already ten years after the opening of the Council were subsumed under the central concept of "liberation theology." Also the Peruvian theologian **Gustavo Gutiérrez** has contributed to it. He was then consultant for **Carlos Parteli**, at that time bishop of the Diocese of Tacuarembó y Rivera, and then for many years Archbishop of Montevideo.

According to Jon Sobrino, the Conference of Medellín was not a "mere application or extension of the Council" (Concilium 48 [2012], No. 3, 304). It was a sign of the creative process of the implementation of the Council - begun by the Latin American local church. And this process makes obvious the innovative potential of the "event" Vaticanum II, and especially of the documents adopted by it.

Just this creative process, the emergence of the post-conciliar church in Latin America, to which since the late sixties also the against this background emerging liberation theologies contributed, had not only the result that other local churches, especially the German became increasingly aware of Latin America. It has also shaped the universal Church and the cooperation of the local churches. At the level of parishes, church development work, and university theology impulses of the liberation theology and the new ecclesial models of the base communities were

adapted (see HK, December 2012, 609 ff.).

Fifty years later, there is no longer taken much notice of the continent where the event of Vaticanum II formed a history of its own and resulted in a profound process of renewal of the Church. The church aid agencies, especially the "Adveniat" actions, do certainly an important lobby work for the Church in Latin America. The topics of those actions remind us of the important role which the laity, catechists - as e. g. in Honduras - and ecclesial base communities played and play in a limited scope. But this important reminder of the post-conciliar church in Latin America can not hide the fact that the 'Spring' which began with Vaticanum II has been interrupted. This occurred already in the seventies, especially in the eighties when the conflict escalated between the magisterium / Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Latin American churches with their new forms of social pastoral, inculturated catechesis and especially the liberation theologies.

With the retirement of the generation of bishops who attended Vaticanum II, a new episcopacy has been appointed. It does no longer focus on the strength and renewal of the local church, the foundation of which was laid especially in the conciliar documents "Lumen Gentium" and "Christus Dominus"; it rather is strengthening the ties with Rome. These tensions between the local and universal Church have always formed the history of the church. They were not only burdensome but also fruitful.

The Church does no longer find a Language for the World

The increasing "ecclesiocentrism" - in the late seventies Karl Rahner spoke of it not only with regard to Latin America - brought and brings about a lack of acceptance of the Catholic Church in Latin America. Another result of it is the till this day not diminished polarization between hierarchy and church base, and between different theologies: the one is oriented towards the North Atlantic area and Rome, the other is shaped by liberation theology and by the various practical forms of grassroots and popular movements. "It seems that the hierarchy", so it is formulated by **Cecilio Lora** who worked from 1965 to 1973 in the Secretariat of CELAM with Bishop Eugenio Pironio, the then Secretary-General, "is in many places far away from the interests of the people of God." There is not enough dialogue. "The church is in a

great crisis."

This is indicated by the breaking up of Catholicism, the massive growth of the Pentecostal movement, and the many new foundations of evangelical churches that are partly shaped by syncretism.

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Theologians such as the in Porto Alegre working Capuchin **Luis Carlos Susin** take a sobering look at the present and future of the Catholic Church in Latin America. In Brazil, which was until recently characterized by an almost purely Catholic population, there are today still 60 percent Catholic. According to the projections, it will soon be 40 percent.

In the post-conciliar period the Latin American church has found a new identity. By interpreting the "signs of the times" she has redefined the Church's relationship to the world: she took sides with the poor, and accused the systems of injustice, racism and various human rights violations, but today, so Susin, she finds no longer a language for the world, especially not for young people.

And yet, the challenges which the continent is facing are not fewer than in the days of the conference of Medellín. It is also today necessary to accuse human rights violations and violence by drug crime and "Maras," i.e. the (youth) gangs - especially in view of the continued growth of the poverty gap. Is it therefore possible to celebrate the Council? How important is this "anniversary"?

The Significance of the Liberation Theologies

At various Catholic universities in Latin America, there have been this year already several small-scale symposia on the Second Vatican Council, so in Fortaleza or at the UCA in San Salvador. Others are planned and will be held in the coming months. An important undertaking, which was supported by various Latin

American institutions, was the "Congreso de teología continental." It took place from 7 to 11 October 2012 at the Jesuit University Unisinos in São Leopoldo/Brazil. 733 participants from across Latin America and a few guests from Europe (28), a mixture of old and young, of theologians who work at universities and many priests, nuns, catechists, among them for example the group of priests "por el tercer mundo" and the Argentine group of priests "opción por los pobres" who are working in the field of pastoral care have reminded of two things: On the one hand of the 50 years since the opening of the Council, and on the other hand of the "geographical, historical and practical translation of 'aggiornamento'" (**Victor Codina**) into the form of liberation theology. The latter emerged 40 years ago, due to the the book publications of Gustavo Gutierrez ("Teología de la liberación"), **Leonardo Boff** ("Jesucristo Liberador"), **Juan Luis Segundo** ("De la sociedad a la teología") and **Hugo Assmann** ("Teoría desde la praxis de la liberación").

Among the organizers were the continental network "Amerindia" (it had already in advance of the meeting initiated an intensive preparatory process in the different regions of Latin America by meetings in Guatemala, Santiago de Chile, Mexico City and Bogota), several Jesuit universities as e.g. Javeriana in Bogotá, the Ecumenical Association of Mexican theologians (Asociación teológica Ecumenica de México, ATEM), the Latin American Confederation of Religious Orders (CLAR - it was represented by its leaders at the meeting), CEHILA, the network of Latin American church historians, the ecumenically oriented Brazilian Society of Theology and Religious Studies SOTER (Sociedad de Ciencias y Teológica Ecumenica de la Religión de Brasil), the Guatemalan network for theology and pastoral care, and the Latin American ecclesial news agency "Adital".

Particularly in view of a difficult time of preparation for the conference, due to a variety of hostilities and requests up to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, at the beginning the Jesuit **Marcelo Fernandes de Aquino**, president of the Jesuit university Unisinos, made it quite clear that the conference sees itself as a "service to the hermeneutics of the Council" and as a reminder of the prophecy of Vaticanum II. It intends to go the way of a common "discernment of spirits in the present time" - in the footsteps of the crucified and poor Jesus.

The commemoration of the 50 years of the opening of the Council and of 40 years of liberation theology in Latin America belong together. According to the Chilean

theologian and Jesuit **Jorge Costadoat**, the theology of liberation is a sign that Latin America has reached 'adulthood', because with the theology of liberation Latin America "has begun to think for itself" for the first time in the 500-year history of the continent. "Without the Council," said Jon Sobrino (Concilium, 300), "the church of the poor would not exist, but she also does not only exist because of the Council. And without the church of the poor, as she emerged in the Medellín context, the Council would not have unfolded in the Third World in such an accordance with the Gospel. And without the church of the poor (...), many basic elements of the Council would never have developed such a creative force."

In contrast, the ostracizing and polarizing hermeneutics of Vaticanum II and the one-sided interpretation of history by fundamentalist groups in Latin American Catholicism, whose impact on Roman circles should not be underestimated. It became apparent again prior to the conference: they suspect theologians like Jon Sobrino, Victor Codina, Pedro Trigo or Leonardo Boff of being followers of Marxism. Only the history of its reception will show whether a conference like that of São Leopoldo will have a broad effect. It traced the 'footsteps' of Vaticanum II and was also in its worships and prayers shaped by the "Prophecy of the Council" and the spirit of the many witnesses of faith in Latin America. The low response in church media - outside of the "liberation theology scene" - makes rather skeptical.

A Process of Spiritual Renewal

The Congress in Sao Leopoldo, however, has not in the least polarized. The participants went on paths of a "shared discernment of spirits." On the one hand, the importance of the path of liberation in the footsteps of the poor Jesus for the whole Church and especially for the renewal of her pastoral care, especially in terms of social pastoral, was brought out in the lectures of **Agenor Brighenti** (Pontificia Universidade Católica do Paraná), Jon Sobrino (San Salvador), Victor Codina (Bolivien), Pedro Trigo (Venezuela), **Sergio Torres** (Chile), **João Batista Libânio** (Belo Horizonte/ Brasilien) and Gustavo Gutiérrez (because of an accident

he took part via video conference from the U.S.). On the other hand, it was emphasized by the testimony of 18 Latin American bishops (especially from Brazil, but also Mexico and Chile), as e.g. **José Maria Pires** (council father, and from 1965 to 1995 Archbishop of João Pessoa / Paraíba, Brazil) and **Demetrio Valentini** (Bishop of Jales, Brazil; he took part in the Council as a journalist). In their lively reminiscence of the Council and the path of the post-conciliar church in Latin America, they impressively focused on the "option for the poor" and requested it from the church of the future. The path of the Latin American post-conciliar church was a process of an impressive spiritual renewal. It was therefore no coincidence that several presentations reminded of the in 2011 deceased Belgian-Brazilian theologian **José Comblin**. In his theological impulses he described repeatedly the work of God Holy Ghost in the diverse reality of life of the poor people. Already since the late sixties, he observed the changes in Latin American Catholicism especially in the big cities - changes that were due also to the new consciousness of the indigenous peoples and their cultural and religious traditions, and to the growth of Pentecostal and evangelical movements.

The new paths of liberation theology, which were taken since the eighties, found room in respective workshops or discussion forums for an inculturated, an indigenous theology, which is inculturated into the diverse cultural and religious realities.

It is for instance represented by an indigenous theologian, the Mexican **Eleazar López**. In addition, there is the Afro-American theology, a theology in the context of migration and violence by which the Colombian reality is shaped, and above all the feminist liberation theology. The latter has since the late seventies formulated the "option for the poor" as "option for the poor women", but also as criticism of the patriarchalism of the liberation theology of the founding generation.

In the main lectures the new challenges, especially the cultural and religious pluralism and a new ecumenism were admittedly mentioned, but they have not been

described more in detail. Thus, the plenary assembly of the congress and the retrospection on the paths of the Latin American post-conciliar Church were certainly affected by a certain nostalgia. The deceased champions of liberation theology were, certainly rightly, called to mind: in addition to José Comblin and **Ronaldo Muñoz Ignacio Ellacuría, Juan Luis Segundo, and Maria Carmelita de Freitas**. And Leonardo Boff affectionately described himself and his colleagues as "dinosaurs" who represent an era that ranges from the past into the present time.

Ways out of the Crisis

Counter-accented orientations towards the future were set by the young generation, by theologians who had just gained their doctorate, and especially by female theologians who were present in large numbers and deliberately networked at the meeting. The Dominican nun **Geraldina Céspedes**, who is working as missionary and theologian in Guatemala, and the Mexican theologian **Marilú Rojas**, who in Leuven completed her dissertation on Ecofeminism, brought out the main points of a pluralistic and ecofeminist liberation theology. The contributions of other theologians, as e.g. **Mercedes Amador** from San Salvador, **Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro** from Bogotá, **Maricarmen Bracamontes** from Mexico, and **Luisa Pedreja and Cleusa Andreotta** from São Leopoldo developed the width and length of a liberating spirituality on the side of the poor.

In view of the vitality and creativity especially of the younger theologians' contributions, Cecilio Lora's statement that the liberation theology lives and enjoys good health is certainly true, even if from the perspective of the universal Church the assessment of the theologian **Jung Mon Sun** (Professor of Religious Studies at the Methodist faculty in São Paulo) is rather appropriate, namely that the liberation theology - and with it the path of the Latin American post-conciliar church - are in a crisis. It was therefore characteristic that after the southern Brazilian springtime, which accompanied the opening of the session, and after violent thunderstorms the winter again made itself felt.

Ways out of the crisis are only jointly possible: in the dialogue of the bishops, in a reinforcement of their collegiality, in dialogue with the priests, nuns and monks,

and catechists who work in the various grassroots movements, in dialogue with the theologies which are taught at the faculties and in seminars and have still mostly European and Roman features, and in dialogue with the various new paths of liberation theology and a thinking that is inculturated in the Latin American realities. That such paths are possible became clear at the conference in remembrance of the liberating accents set by the Latin American bishops at the last joint meeting of the Latin American bishops in Aparecida (2007) (see [HK, September 2007, 450 ff](#), and [August 2008, 417ff.](#)). Aparecida, this was the unanimous tenor, has reaffirmed the path of the Latin American post-conciliar church, which has been opened up with Medellín. It was a sign of hope that the texts of Vaticanum II were re-read against this background of the liberating path of a church on the side of the poor. It may thus result in an anniversary of the Council that may awaken the disrupted springtime.

In the next years in Latin America, just this re-reading of the texts of Vaticanum II will be on the agenda, in order to impart them to the young generation, especially to the younger generation of priests. For many bishops, said Bishop Demetrio Valentini in his statement at the Congress, the Council is a "dead archive of history" and there is the danger that it is no longer known, just as little as its creative implementation in Latin America. What is needed is to free the memory of the particular path of the Gospel's inculturation in Latin America from taboos, in order to open up for the future the potentials which this approach still today has.

Hélder Câmara had demanded, "No dejen morir la profecía" ("Do not allow that prophecy dies"). At the congress in São Leopoldo the reception of the impulses of "Lumen Gentium" in the base communities was brought to mind. They see themselves as poor people - as the in December 2009 deceased Chilean theologian Ronaldo Muñoz has described it in many of his works and embodied by his practice. And - following the impulses of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation "Dei Verbum" - also the importance that the Bible has got for the people was called to mind. This was the great life project of **Carlos Mesters** and his "lectura popular de la Biblia". And what also was brought to mind was a Church which knew how to combine the challenges of reading the "signs of the times" in Latin America in the "cry of the poor" and in the picture of the "crucified peoples".

The Congress could not do more than take a broad view on the path of the creative translation of Vatican II into the Latin American local church, and encourage that

the Latin American post-conciliar projects for the coming years - as e.g. the research work at the Centro Manuel Larrain in Santiago de Chile - do a profound theological work:

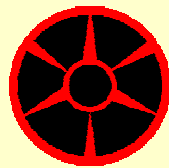
Following the path of the Latin American church, contributions to the hermeneutics of Vaticanum II and to the generative reading of the texts of the Council shall be made. They have to show especially the connection between the two major dogmatic constitutions on the church: "Lumen Gentium" and "Gaudium et Spes."

This is exactly what has distinguished the creative translation of Vaticanum II in Latin America and just today this must be called to mind: the new consciousness of a local church as "an active subject of the Church" (Victor Codina). It opens up the paths of evangelization only by the incarnation in the concrete realities of life and by the interpretation of the "signs of the times" - "Close to God and Close to the Poor," as it is formulated in the title of the final document of the congress. It is necessary today to bring this to mind, if the Church wants to remain a lively sign of God's kingdom and not betray the spirit of the Gospel. "Gloria Dei, vivens pauper" (**Oscar Romero**). According to **João Batista Libanio** the Poor hold in their hand the thread which leads out of the labyrinth of the present time. With this wording the Latin American church has translated the Second Vatican Council's new self-definition of the Church as the "sacrament of the nations" into her reality.

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