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Latin America and Transnational Missions 1968–2007

Mario I. Aguilar

There have been radical changes in the context and practice of Christianity in Latin America since the 1968 bishops' meeting at Medellín, Colombia.¹ The themes of a more prophetic and incarnated church resonated within the spirit of the conference and later within the application of those policies to the actual life and pastoral work of the Catholic Church in Latin America. One of those changes was the possibility that out of the poverty of Latin America a contribution could be made to other churches and countries in the world. As a result, after Medellín not only the Latin American church renewed its commitment to mission *ad intra* but hundreds of missionaries from Latin America implemented the call to proclaim the Gospel to all nations through an intense involvement in a mission *ad extra*.

The conference of Medellín in 1968 where most Latin American bishops took part started a new reflection on the relation between the church and the world in Latin America. This reflexion extended to the church in Latin America and the rest of the world and as a result it triggered the sending of Latin American missionaries from one region to another, from one country to another and from Latin America to other continents, particularly Africa. This paper: (a) explores the theo-

¹ For others aspects of the history of Latin American Christianity after Medellín see the following publications by Mario I. Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology*, vol. I: *The Problem of Theological Generations*. London 2007; *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology*, vol. II: *Theology and Civil Society*, London 2008; *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology*, vol. III: *A Theology of the Periphery*, London 2008; *The Kairos of Medellín 1968: Towards a Movement for Liberation and New Mission after Vatican II*, in: Patrick Claffey/Joseph Egan (ed.), *Movement or Moment? Assessing Liberation Theology Forty Years after Medellín*, Berlin 2009, 9–28; *1968: A Historiography of a New Reformation in Latin America*, Santiago/London/New York 2010 and *1968: A historiography of a New Reformation in Latin America*, in: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* 104 (2010) 201–211.

retical reflections of Medellín, (b) the consequences of these reflexions, and (c) it outlines some of the examples of missionary cooperation between Latin America and Africa. It is clear that from being a continent that welcomed missionaries in numbers Latin America became in a very small scale a missionary continent since the advent of Medellín.

The Foundations of Medellín

Following the completion of Vatican II in 1965 the Latin American Bishops' Conference headed by the progressive Chilean Bishop Manuel Larraín scheduled a general meeting of Latin American Bishops at Medellín (Colombia) that took place in 1968. The meeting coincided with a time of questioning about poverty and injustice in Latin America and with the start of a period in which military regimes became more the norm rather than the exception.² The preparations at local diocesan level for Medellín were intense and those leading the deliberations at continental level were not the theologians but the pastoral bishops who in the case of Brazil were already experiencing a systematic violation of human rights since the military had already taken over the government in 1964.

Within this difficult political context the Latin American countries were responding to the implementation of Vatican II with enthusiasm and with a committed Catholic laity that had been heavily influenced by John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967). The ideas contained in both encyclicals spoke of the possibility of a just order in society but an order that had to consider *development* rather than armed struggle as its chore value for an economic stability that provided the possibility of restoring dignity to all nations and to all human beings.

The genesis of Latin American liberation theology coincided with developments within a theology of inculturation in Africa and the Christian dialogue with world religions in Asia.³ However, within those globalized developments a

² For a detailed analysis of the relation between church and state at the period and within different Latin American countries see Jeffrey Klaiber SJ, *The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y. 1998).

³ At the theological level African and Latin American theologians encountered each other through the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the first period of their work was coordinated by Enrique Dussel and François Houtart, see a useful historical overview in Enrique Dussel, *Theologies of the «Periphery» and the «Centre»: Encounter or Confrontation?*, in: Claude Geffré/Gustavo Gutiérrez/Virgil Elizondo (ed.), *Different Theologies, Common Responsibility, Babel or Pentecost?* (Concilium 171), Edinburgh 1984, 87–97, see also EATWOT, *The Emergent Gospel*, Maryknoll 1976. For a theological overview see Theo Witvliet, *A Place in the Sun: An Introduction to Liberation Theology in the Third World*, London 1985. An Asian Christianity as a Christian project was more problematic; numbers of Christians in Asia, with the exception of the Philippines, remain small and the post-Vatican II discussions on salvation within the world religions created more than an impasse between those who adhered to a Christ centric option (exclusivists) and those who understood the world religions as places where God could save

Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, became the face of liberation theology and helped other priests' reflections vis-à-vis the implementation of Vatican II. Those priests were trying to develop a systematic framework that connected the life of the Latin American poor, development theory and a divine sense of history, all under an umbrella of theological and material liberation.⁴ *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) became the classic theological monograph; however, many other theologians started working on Christology, ecclesiology, soteriology, the history of the Church and the role of the Basic Christian communities.⁵ The final documents of Medellín supported that theological program by reiterating the materiality of God's salvation and by encouraging an ecclesial immersion in the life of the materially poor, the marginalized and those who were the victims of social injustice due to the fact that societies had created unjust structures included by the Latin American bishops under the umbrella of «structural sin».⁶

The development of Latin American theology has an enormous complexity but its genesis can be traced to the European reflection by Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo SJ in France, where both studied at the time when John XXIII had called the council and had spoken of «a church of the poor».⁷ Juan Luis Segundo SJ and Gustavo Gutiérrez had a different pastoral experience and that experience shaped what Segundo called «two kinds of liberation theology».⁸ Thus, for Gutiérrez and his life in the slums of Lima the poor and the marginalized were at the centre of God's work because they represented the incarnation of God while theology as a reflection was a «second act». The option for the poor as a theological option meant for Gutiérrez that Jesus in his life expressed a real closeness to them and liberation theology arose out of «our better understanding of the depth and complexity of the poverty and oppression experienced

(inclusivists), see Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes towards the World Religions*, London 1985.

⁴ For historical data on his life see Sergio Torres, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: A historical sketch*, in: Marc H. Ellis/Otto Maduro (ed.), *The Future of Liberation Theology. Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, Maryknoll 1989, 95–101.

⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas*, Salamanca 1999 and Lima 1971; for a full review of the theological works of 18 Latin American theologians see Mario I. Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology*, vols. 1–2, London 2007.

⁶ See Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops 1968, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council II Conclusions*, Washington, D.C. 1970.

⁷ For a comprehensive history of liberation theology and of some of the most prominent theologians of liberation see Mario I. Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology*, 3 volumes, London 2007–2008.

⁸ Juan Luis Segundo SJ, *Two Theologies of Liberation*, Toronto 22 March 1983, in: Alfred T. Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Maryknoll 1990, 353–366.

by most of humanity; it is due to our perception of the economic, social, and cultural mechanisms that produce that poverty; and before all else, it is due to the new light which the word of the Lord sheds on that poverty».⁹

For Segundo, who had experienced pastoral work with the educated elites, liberation theology remained within the realm of the educated theologians who through their pastoral ministry passed some fresh ideas about the implementation of Vatican II to the laity and to the Catholic faithful in parishes. Those ideas reflected Segundo's own work with reflection groups, university students and young professionals and his own commitment to a systematic investigation of theological themes at the service of the Church.

There is no contradiction between the role of the theologian in Gutiérrez and Segundo's work but certainly Gutiérrez' work triggered numerous theological writings that used Marxism as a hermeneutical tool in order to explore social realities. Within the context of the 1970s Christians and Marxists had encountered each other in the same project of challenging unjust social structures; Christians following the values of the Kingdom of God, Marxists following the ideals of a revolution in which the people and the masses would be equal through revolutions inspired by the Cuban Revolution (1959). The radicalization of the Latin American theologians coincided with the rising of Christians that equated the Gospel with a socialist political project, the so-called Christians for Socialism, and the consequent persecution of pastoral agents by the military in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The optimism of the Council Fathers, and the rich documents that reincorporated the Church into the contemporary world, created an optimistic and exciting atmosphere in Latin America. However, there was no way in which all the different pastoral agents were going to act and think in the same way. There was the need to renew the Christian communities but there was also the need to outline economic development and a better distribution of wealth within society. In this sense, the complexity of the task of the bishops' reflection at Medellín was enormous and the dissemination of their own pastoral ideas necessary and much wanted by religious, lay people and particularly the grass-roots communities.

The means to achieve that social and economic change were of concern to Christians and to Marxists alike, and therefore within a post-Cuban revolution period a few Christian communities and a few priests understood the «signs of the times» as calling them to join Latin American groups that wanted to foster violent revolutions. That was the case of Fr. Camilo Torres Restrepo, a Colombian priest who was to become a symbol of the possible Christian commitment to Latin American revolutions. Already at the time of the Council Camilo Torres had developed the idea that the revolutionary struggle could be a Christian and a

⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Option for the Poor*, in: Ignacio Ellacuría SJ/Jon Sobrino SJ (ed.), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll, N.Y./North Blackburn, Victoria 1993, 235–250, 250.

priestly activity. His influence was large in Colombian society because he himself came from a well-to-do family but also because he was involved with students at the National University of Colombia. Cardinal Luis Concha moved him from the university to a suburban parish where he started attacking the hierarchy of the Church by suggesting that they were part of the Colombian oligarchy, a group that according to him impeded the formation of a more just society in Colombia. In June 1965 he asked to be relieved from his priestly duties and in November 1965 he joined the Colombian guerrilla, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional. Torres was killed on the 15th of February 1966 and became an icon for many other Christians in Latin America.

Within that context of change and challenges Paul VI travelled to Bogotá, Colombia in 1968, in order to open the 39th International Eucharistic Congress. The first visit by a Pope to Latin America was seen as a great moment for a growing Church. Thus, leading Latin American bishops such as Cardinal Silva Henríquez of Chile felt excitement about the Pope's visit to Latin America and saw the visit as a service to all.¹⁰ The «continent of hope» was the best ground for the implementation of Vatican II and Silva Henríquez felt that finally «the servant of the servants of God» was arriving to visit the poor of Latin America as the leader of a servant Church. The meeting of Latin American bishops in Colombia was to set the guidelines for the implementation of Vatican II in Latin America and the final document of Medellín was to vindicate the demands by those protesting against the pope's visit rather than crush their pastoral dreams. It is possible to argue that without the arrival of Paul VI the meeting of all Latin American bishops at Medellín would not have had the same strength and the same impact on the pastoral life of the Church in Latin America.

Thus, on the 21st of August 1968 the Chilean Cardinal Silva Henríquez travelled to Colombia in order to await the Pope's arrival on the following day. During his visit to Colombia Paul VI ratified the winds of change given by Vatican II, the support of the Church to the poor and their just causes, and he condemned any advocacy of violence in order to achieve a just society in Latin America. Paul VI inaugurated the second general meeting of Latin American Bishops at Medellín and returned to Rome. Thus, the Medellín conference was a fruitful opportunity for renewal and many of the concepts outlined in the final document were new additions to the social doctrine of the Church, e.g. «a truly human economics», «institutionalised violence», and «sinful structures».

¹⁰ Silva Henríquez gave the following thoughts in an interview with U.S. News & World Report: «Este proceso, válido para toda la Iglesia, se singulariza y reviste de connotación particular en América Latina. Continente en vías de desarrollo, el servicio eclesial a América Latina se concreta en un servicio al desarrollo, entendido en la acepción de Populorum Progressio: de condiciones menos humanas, hacia un humanismo integral, que incluye el don de la fe», *Memorias II*: 137.

Let's take a local example of the impact of Medellín on the local churches in Latin America by taking the case of the Catholic Church in Chile. As with most churches the Medellín conference gave a boost to the renewal of the Church in Chile and to the diocesan synod in Santiago. The synod had its second session during the months of September and November 1968. The theme of the laity was the only theme of the second session, after further discussions on media, pastoral assistance, and culture were rejected. Within the general theme three particular groups in need were discussed: the youth, the workers, and the businessmen. There were heated debates on the relation of workers with businessmen, and even the then President Eduardo Frei (1964–1970) called Cardinal Silva Henríquez to stress that the social doctrine of the Church should prevail over national discussions. However, as it happened in most local churches participants at the Santiago diocesan synod were also very critical of the archbishop and they accused him of creating large economic and ecclesial structures within the Santiago archdiocese that, according to them, should not be encouraged in a post-Vatican II Church.

Just as the archdiocese of Santiago was taking the Medellín documents very seriously, the Chilean bishops also discussed the possible changes needed in pastoral policies throughout Chile. In October 1968 the Chilean Episcopal Conference met at the Casa de Ejercicios Las Rosas in order to discuss the final document of Medellín and they published a declaration condemning violence, Marxism, and any hatred towards others. It was clear that the bishops preferred to be consistent with the Christian message rather than fill churches in a populist effort to go with the political flow of change and socialism.¹¹ On the 5th of October 1968 Silva Henríquez expressed those concerns to Paul VI in Rome and had to admit that some of the young Christians were too close to some leftist political groups and that, in his opinion, they perceived the Church as a solely human institution.

Thus, it is at Medellín in 1968 that the theological movement of a Latin America driven by lay unpublished theologians began.¹² The Church in Latin America had to ask questions about their religious practice within difficult political circumstances and aided by the theological reflection of Gutiérrez the bishops did not separate religion and politics but provided a political response of commitment to political change and the defence of human rights. Virgilio Elizondo has argued, for example, that the transformative impact of the Medellín Conference on the church's pastoral practice and theology was far greater than

¹¹ The bishops said: «Una cosa es la justicia y otra es el marxismo [...] Los marxistas saben que no se puede ser a la vez un buen marxista y un buen cristiano [...] En el fondo de esta violencia impaciente hay más odio que amor, más pasión que razón, más voluntad de ver y destruir el mal presente que de construir el bien futuro, que permanece las más de las veces lejano y confuso», *Memorias II*: 150-151.

¹² *Emergence of a World Church and the irruption of the poor*, in: Gregory Baum (ed.), *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1999, 108.

that exercised by any other council of the church. No dogmas or confessions of faith were questioned or challenged – Protestant or Catholic. Instead, the whole edifice of Constantinian Christian thought, imagery, and symbolism was radically challenged in the name of Christianity itself. What was initiated was not a new academic or philosophical theology, but rather the transformation of the very structures and methods of doing theology. To be faithful and authentic, Christian theology would have to emerge out of the spiritual experience of the believing community grappling with its history and responding to its contemporary situation. However, the subsequent pastoral implementation of Medellín was very different so that in the case of Chile the bishops, when needed, challenged the military regime while there was an avoidance of any prophetic denunciation in the case of Argentina.¹³

The Idea of a Theological Kairos

It could be argued that the socio-political processes present in Latin America before and during 1968 triggered a pastoral and social response by the churches that in turn made the possibilities of social and religious change possible. However, a burning theological question remains: what triggered the quick and intense response by the majority of the pastoral players of that time which confronted social narratives that had previously been assumed as normal, normative and adequate?

In her insightful assessment of liberation theology for the 21st century the Argentinean theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid has argued that «Latin American liberation theology comes first of all from theological acts of disturbance that are also acts of collective love. Moreover, those acts of love are acts of a subverting, transgressive kind of love».¹⁴ Agreeing with her I would also argue that the implications of a *kairos*, a special time, that becomes a movement for liberation, arises out of a time in which collectively groups within the church took very seriously the commandment of love and neighbour.

Medellín, as a gathering of Latin American bishops, gave authority and canonical evolution to small movements of reformers who had been in practice confronting the possibilities that Latin American societies, traditionally considered Catholics, were not following the parameters of the Gospel. There were millions of holy and pious Catholics on the Latin American continent but their daily life did not question the actual organization and objectives of Latin American states in which, beginning with Brazil in 1964, military regimes and the escalation of violence and uncertainty was becoming the norm.

¹³ See Mario I. Aguilar, *A Social History of the Catholic Church in Chile*, vol. I *The First Period of the Pinochet Government 1973–1980*, Lewiston/Lampeter 2004.

¹⁴ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Liberation Theology to Indecent Theology: The Trouble with Normality in Theology*, in: Iván Petrella (ed.), *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 2005, 20–38, 21.

The Prophetic Role of the Jesuits

Among the groups that were going through a renewal were men and women religious who already had been encouraged by the reflections and the 1968 public declaration by the Jesuits on their life style and their pastoral work throughout Latin America. The Provincials of all the Jesuit provinces of Latin America met in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 6–14 May 1968. The national heads of the Jesuits reflected on their view of mission and their positioning within Latin America and decided to reiterate their involvement «in the temporal life of humankind».¹⁵ However, within the particular context of Latin America their statement for their involvement within a movement to change unjust structures and to be with the people was very strong and very down to earth. There was no high theology within the document but a challenge to personal lives and community activities with a certain social and religious utopia. In a central passage of that document they asserted:

«In all our activities, our goal should be the liberation of humankind from every sort of servitude that oppresses it: the lack of life's necessities, illiteracy, the weight of sociological structures which deprive it of personal responsibility over life itself, the materialistic conception of history. We want all our efforts to work together toward the construction of a society in which all persons will find their place, and in which they will enjoy political, economic, cultural, and religious equality and liberty.»¹⁶

Within the document and in later educational practices the Jesuits addressed a usual criticism towards their academic institutions, particularly schools and universities: that Jesuit schools educated the children of the rich and that their universities reiterated that social paradigm. The document argued that all Jesuit institutions should foster the social gospel and that all students should be involved in practical activities in which they would experience different social realities.¹⁷ The Jesuit Provincials called for a formation of consciences among those they taught and encouraged all Jesuits to use the media to foster those aims. However, the final call was aimed at all Jesuit superiors to implement those changes as soon as possible, even when some of those changes would take some time. Moreover, there was also a call for a personal conversion with deep questions to each individual Jesuit working in Latin America:

«Are we capable of responding to the world's expectations? Are our faith and charity equal to the anxiety-ridden appeals of the world around us? Do we practice self-denial sufficiently, so that God is able to flood us with light and energy? Does personal prayer have its proper place in our life, so that we are united with God in

¹⁵ Provincials of the Society of Jesus, *The Jesuits in Latin America*, May 1968, in: Alfred T. Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Maryknoll 1990, 77–83.

¹⁶ Provincials of the Society of Jesus, *The Jesuits in Latin America* (see note 15), § 3.

¹⁷ Provincials of the Society of Jesus, *The Jesuits in Latin America* (see note 15), § 7.

this great human task that cannot succeed without God? Can the Society keep within its ranks those members who do not want to pray or who do not have a real and personal prayer in life?»¹⁸

The response of the Jesuit communities in Latin America was swift and sometimes unsettling for parents and teachers of those students involved. Parents were told about the revised Jesuit aims within their schools and despite the many Jesuits that left the priesthood after Vatican II the Jesuit secondary schools maintained their academic excellence with the addition of summer work or activities of a social nature for pupils in their last years of secondary school. Within universities it was easier to comply with practical activities of a social nature as most university students were affected by a political climate of change, political awareness and political questioning. Thus, the Jesuits not only affected the developments of theologies, pastoral or otherwise, but also became involved in many activities related to the defence of indigenous minorities, political refugees and migrants.

In the case of El Salvador, place where over the years the prominent theologian Jon Sobrino SJ worked the Jesuits decided to build and implement a university that was to be a reflection of the open spirit of Vatican II and at the same time became a model institution of commitment to the poor and the marginalized. The challenges of Medellín assured the Jesuit community that the meeting at Medellín was not only a *kairos* but also a movement that could not be stopped and a short outline of this influential educational Jesuit enterprise arising out of Medellín is in order here. I shall refer to the educational reform and tertiary education led by the Jesuits in El Salvador, a development that led to the assassination of several Jesuits by the Salvadorian Army and the death squads paid by Salvadorian landowners.

The Jesuit-run University of Central America (UCA) campus started to be built in 1970 through financial loans from the Inter-American Development Bank (Banco Interamericano del Desarrollo – BID). The UCA under Román Mayorga Quirós as rector moved quickly into a progressive line following changes within the Jesuits and by 1976 professor Ignacio Ellacuría SJ attracted the animosity of El Salvador's President Arturo Armando Molina after he wrote an editorial in the university's magazine criticizing the halting of the Salvadorian agrarian reform. The government withdrew educational subsidies to the UCA and the attacks on the Jesuits started after the assassination of the Jesuit Rutilio Grande in March 1977 and after the UCA supported all pastoral plans by Archbishop Romero through its department of theology, headed by Jon Sobrino. In 1979 Ellacuría became Rector of the UCA and moved the university into research programs related to the national realities of El Salvador while immersing students, staff and the university community into the social realities of the poor of El Salvador. As the Civil War continued Ellacuría became very prominent

¹⁸ Provincials of the Society of Jesus, *The Jesuits in Latin America* (see note 15), § 10.

within the mediation of peace accords and he spoke strongly against injustice and human rights abuses through the television, the UCA radio and the UCA publications.

Ignacio Ellacuría SJ, at the time of his assassination rector of the university, articulated this particular ministry in the following words:

«the university should be present intellectually where it is needed: to provide science for those who have no science; to provide skills for the unskilled; to be a voice for those who have no voice; to give intellectual support for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to promote and legitimate their rights.»¹⁹

Sobrino was less romantic about the possibilities of a university due to past experiences where Jesuit universities became top educational institutions but in doing so they compromised their possibilities of challenging unjust and sinful structures within society.

Sobrino advocated the option for the poor within a Christian university by arguing that it was unrealistic to suggest that a university should be located among the poor but that all activities and the central activities of a Christian university should look towards the poor. For him, one of the central activities within this kind of university was the dialogue between faith and science and therefore the importance of the teaching and research of theology as a discipline and as a reflection on the life of the poor and the marginalised from a Christian perspective. Sobrino's statement about theology within a university became central to understand the challenges that the Jesuit posed to the powerful in El Salvador and the inspiration they provided to many of the communities linked to their extra-mural courses and training of leaders of Christian communities within El Salvador. Sobrino argued very strongly that

«theology must be turned, then, towards the people of God; it should be inserted effectively among them, draw its agenda from them and accompany them. In this sense, university theology should be a moment of theo-praxis for the whole people of God and should be considered as a theo-culture, a Christo-culture, an ecclesio-culture – that is, an instrument that cultivates and nurtures faith, hope, and love of God's people.»²⁰

The Jesuit response was a communitarian act of love in which a theological response to liberation entailed the possibility of questioning the Jesuit way of life at that time. Other religious congregations followed the same example and an exodus from well-to-do places of ministry took place whereby women religious in numbers left their teaching in well-to-do public schools and missionary orders

¹⁹ Ignacio Ellacuría, *The Task of a Christian University*, in: Jon Sobrino/Ignacio Ellacuría (ed.), *Companions of Jesus. The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador*, New York 1990, 150.

²⁰ Jon Sobrino, *The University's Christian Inspiration*, in: Sobrino/Ellacuría (ed.), *Companions of Jesus* (see note 19), 170–171.

with foreign personnel took very seriously the conclusions of Medellín and opened new parishes in locations where previously only Marxist activists and left-wing ideologists had any access.

The role of religious communities has been generally underplayed in the assessment of changes that took place in those years after Medellín. It is particularly important to remember that religious congregations and communities with expatriate missionaries from Ireland, Spain, France and the United States expressed their own search for a closer follow-up of the Gospel within a movement from their convents and their religious houses to the periphery, to the shanty towns and to places where they were most needed.

This movement towards the periphery and the involvement of Christians within movements of liberation was to inbuilt a golden pastoral moment to Latin America by which the period of the 1970s and 1980s could be called a true *kairos* arising of 1968 and at the same time the formation of a movement for liberation that was to shape the development of the universal church.

From Medellín to the Ends of the World

It could be argued that the movement towards the poor in Latin America had little to do with the missionary movement that arose out of this experience. I would think the opposite – even when it wasn't articulated in this way the experience of a rich ecclesial community and the fact that millions of Christians took their membership of the church more seriously meant that fresh questions were asked about the poor in other continents.

The change of Latin America from mission field to missionary church after Medellín was easier within the protestant and evangelical churches due to the fact that mission and ministry did not have the same clerical/sacramental connotation. Indeed, for the Roman Catholic world it was practically more difficult to justify sending priests somewhere else when the reality was that thousands of priests were needed in Latin America for presiding over the celebration of the Eucharist and to administer the sacraments.

One example of this change from receiving field to sending church was provided by the Latin America Mission (LAM).²¹ LAM started with the call to evangelize by a married couple: Harry Strachan, a Canadian based in Aberdeen, and Susan Beamish from Cork. They married in Argentina and both followed Strachan's call to minister in Latin America. In 1921 they established the Latin America Evangelization Campaign in San José, Costa Rica, later to change in 1938 to the name of the Latin America Mission. Strachan died in 1945 and his wife and son Kenneth continued the organization of LAM led by several foreign missionaries until 1971 when the leadership of LAM's major projects was passed

²¹ See full history and the current call to be a missionary and a supporter of LAM at www.lam.org/about/history.

to a Latin American leadership. It became part of the Community of Latin American Evangelical Ministries (CLAME) with a sister organization in the United States. CLAME was dissolved in 1985 and LAM became completely independent. The organization in its mission «planted» churches in Colombia and Costa Rica and started a support group for biblical study. Nowadays, LAM aids with theological programs in Latin America particularly at the Castle of the King (Mexico), the ESEPA Seminary (Costa Rica), the Evangelical Seminary of Caracas (Venezuela) and the Biblical Seminary (Colombia).

LAM missionaries from Latin America have since the 1980s worked in Latin American countries, Africa and Asia, in the United Kingdom and Spain. It is estimated that there are between 8,500 and 10,000 evangelical missionaries from different Latin American countries working in a trans-national manner.²²

The Roman Catholic world in Latin America was slower to respond to the missionary call but it has also created a missionary movement made of priests, nuns and lay people who have left their own countries and worked in Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia. If one takes the case of Chile in particular it is clear that missionary work has evolved from being a European preoccupation to constitute a Latin American response to the Gospel. For example, by 2003 there was a considerable increase of missionaries from Chile working in other countries and other continents: 256 missionaries (179 nuns, 61 priests and 4 lay people). Of those Chilean missionaries 25 nuns, 19 priests and 4 lay people were working in Africa.²³ Concrete examples of an international exchange of missionaries were provided Carlos Pellegrin and Jorge Vega, two Chilean bishops appointed by Pope Benedict XVI, who had been missionaries in Ghana (Pellegrin, bishop of Chillán) and Angola (Vega, bishop of Illapel). Most of these missionaries from Chile belonged to religious congregations such as the Divine Word Missionaries, the Salesians and the Jesuits. The Salesians had in 2010 four priests working as missionaries in Africa: Heriberto Cabrera (Mauritius), José Miguel Prieto (Equatorial Guinea), Ricardo Cáceres (Angola) while another Salesian priest, Luis Oyarzo, was working in Cambodia.²⁴ As well as members of religious congregations there were also diocesan priests on loan to other churches from the Archdiocese of Santiago (Roberto Guzmán in Mozambique, Sergio Lorenzini in South Africa and Segundo Galilea in Cuba). Other Chilean dioceses that had priests working in other countries were the diocese of La Serena (Gerardo Cortés in the Philippines) the diocese of Melipilla (Miguel Angel Leiva in Cuba) and the diocese of Los Angeles (Miguel Angel Riquelme in the Philippines).

²² See «Results of the «Ibero American» Mission Conference» at www.lam.org/news/article.php?id=412.

²³ See www.iglesia.cl/breves/roberto_guzman/misioneros.html.

²⁴ www.salesianos.cl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4453&Itemid=1.

One of the most prominent Chilean missionaries to Africa is Fr. Felipe Berríos, a Jesuit, who went to Burundi in 2010. Berríos was previously the national director of the NGO *Un techo para Chile (A Roof for Chile)* an organization that grew to be a huge charitable organization building houses for the poor aided by the Chilean well-to-do. Passionate about social justice and gospel values Berríos criticized the fact that private universities had taken over some of the most beautiful places beside the mountains outside Santiago. Berríos made clear that he requested from the Jesuits to be sent to Africa in order to share the reality of the poor something that he was not able to do in Latin America as he was a champion of the poor but from the location of leadership within a huge financial organization.

Conclusions

The meeting of Catholic Bishops in Medellín (1968) marked the beginning of a self-pastoral reflection on mission that continued over the past 40 years. This new reflection on a church's option and life style that could match the life of Jesus of Nazareth led to a clear option for evangelical poverty based on the Gospel.

The vision of the bishops in Medellín influenced heavily the missionary drive from Latin America, less triggered by the conversion of non-Christians and much more based on service to other Christians from the standpoint of poverty and service. As the Medellín documents asserted:

«the Lord's particular mandate to «evangelize the poor» should lead us to a re-distribution of efforts and apostolic personnel so as to give an effective preference to the poor, needy and marginalized for whatever reason, fostering and increasing the initiatives and studies already under way.»²⁵

This mandate to evangelize the poor was taken very seriously and hundreds of missionaries were sent to poorer communities throughout the world in order to give preference to the more needy in sacramental assistance as well as in economic need. Thus, the change from a mission field to a prophetic and servant church in Latin America after Medellín followed the central reflection given by the Latin American bishops on the nature of the Church when they asserted that the Church wants to be the humble servant of all.²⁶ This missionary commitment to trans-national mission was reaffirmed by the subsequent meetings of Latin American bishops in Puebla (Mexico 1979), Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic 1992) and Aparecida (Brazil 2007). It is a fact that this missionary drive was re-affirmed by the bishops meeting in Aparecida and it will continue growing as the twenty-first century unfolds.

²⁵ Documento Final de Medellín XIV, 9 available at www.ensayistas.org/critica/liberacion/medellin/medellin16.htm.

²⁶ Medellín XIV, 18.

Latin America and Transnational Missions 1968–2007

The conference of Medellín in 1968 where most Latin American bishops took part started a new reflection on the relation between the church and the world in Latin America. This reflexion extended to the church in Latin America and the rest of the world and as a result it triggered the sending of Latin American missionaries from one region to another, from one country to another and from Latin America to other continents, particularly Africa. This paper: (a) explores the theoretical reflections of Medellín, (b) the consequences of these reflexions, and (c) it outlines some of the examples of missionary cooperation between Latin America and Africa. It is clear that from being a continent that welcomed missionaries in numbers Latin America became in a very small scale a missionary continent since the advent of Medellín.

Lateinamerika und die Transnationale Mission 1968–2007

Die Konferenz von Medellín im Jahre 1968, an der die meisten Lateinamerikanischen Bischöfe teilgenommen haben, veranlasste eine neue Reflexion über die Beziehung zwischen Kirche und Welt in Lateinamerika. Diese Reflexion dehnte sich aus in Bezug auf die Kirche in Lateinamerika und den Rest der Welt und als eine Folge war es Auslöser dafür, dass lateinamerikanische Missionare von einer Region zu einer anderen gesandt wurden und dann von Lateinamerika aus nach anderen Kontinenten, vor allem Afrika. Dieser Beitrag geht (a) den theoretischen Überlegungen von Medellín nach, (b) den Auswirkungen dieser Überlegungen und zeigt (c) einige Beispiele von missionarischer Kooperation zwischen Lateinamerika und Afrika auf. Als Kontinent, der Missionare in grosser Zahl willkommen geheissen hatte, ist Lateinamerika in einem sehr kleinen Ausmass seit der Konferenz von Medellín ein Kontinent der Mission geworden.

L'Amérique latine et la mission transnationale 1968–2007

La conférence de Medellín en 1968, à laquelle la plupart des évêques latino-américains ont participé, a marqué le début d'une nouvelle réflexion sur la relation entre l'Eglise et le monde en Amérique latine. Cette réflexion s'est étendue à l'Eglise en Amérique latine et au reste du monde, et a suscité l'envoi de missionnaires latino-américains d'une région à l'autre, d'un pays à l'autre, puis d'Amérique latine à d'autres continents, en particulier l'Afrique. Cet article (a) examine les réflexions théoriques de Medellín, (b) les conséquences de ces réflexions, et (c) décrit certains exemples de coopération missionnaire entre l'Amérique latine et l'Afrique. Il est clair que l'Amérique latine, un continent ayant accueilli les missionnaires en grand nombre, est devenue à très petite échelle un continent missionnaire depuis la conférence de Medellín.

Keywords – Schlüsselbegriffe – Mots clés

Latin America – Lateinamerika – Amérique latine, Medellín – Medellín – Medellín, 1968 – 1968 – 1968, Transnational Missions – transnationale Mission – mission transnationale, Latin American missionaries – lateinamerikanische Missionare – missionnaires latino-américains, Catholic Church – Katholische Kirche – église catholique, Chile – Chile – le Chili, El Salvador – El Salvador El Salvador, Colombia – Kolumbien – la Colombie, Latin America Mission – Lateinamerikanische Mission – Amérique Latine Mission.

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