

## VATICAN II AND PUEBLA ON CHURCH AND POLITICS

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The Conference of the Latin American bishops, held in Puebla between January 27th and February 13th, 1979, has been described as a major 'event'.<sup>1</sup> This is to bring out that something really significant and so, worth noting, has happened on that occasion. Vatican II has also been generally described in similar terms. Indeed, there is a striking similarity between the two. Vatican II and Puebla represent a Church trying to discover itself; to learn about its weaknesses and potentialities and to find out in which direction it has to move in order to establish the right relationship with the world.

But there are differences which make a comparison between the two quite an interesting and an intellectually useful exercise. As a Council representing the whole Church, Vatican II takes cognisance of the **general features** of the socio-political situation in various countries. Nevertheless, the Council speaks through representatives of local Churches who cannot possibly "feel" deep enough each other's concrete problems and life-situations. It adopts on several subjects a rather general viewpoint or a viewpoint derived from the particular experience of the Church in Europe after the war.<sup>2</sup> Hence, what it says sometimes lacks that lively interest in studying specific problems and in suggesting, at least provisional, solutions; it sounds more like a treatise than a truly prophetic voice which people outside European culture can recognize as a word addressed specifically to them.

### LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGIANS ON VATICAN II

In recent years several Latin American theologians have pointed out

1. *Puebla: Comunione e Partecipazione*, edit. and introd. by Piersandro Vanzan and trans. by Alfredo Marranzini, Roma, 1979, pp. vii-x.
2. This criticism of Vatican II is a fairly recent one. It has been generally assumed that the relatively strong representation of Churches from almost all over the world, possibly with the exception of the Eastern part, reflect the actual experience of the Church in all countries. But it is well known that it was European theologians, divided into those from Northern Europe and those from the Roman Curia and usually called the "majority" and the "minority" group respectively, who were the real protagonists of Vatican II. Cf. Roger Aubert *et al.*, *The Church in a Secularized Society*, Vol. V of *The Christian Centuries*, trans. by Janet Sondheimer, London, 1978, p. 629.

the difficulty in applying the teaching of Vatican II to the Church in Latin America. They think that the Council does not always focus on problems which are actually the problems of the Latin American Church. This conviction has led theologians and bishops in Latin America to seek new ways of thinking and to discover a praxis which is more relevant and fitting to the ecclesial Latin American context.

Gustavo Gutierrez has been among the first to see that the Church in Latin America has to confront its own special problems from an angle which is foreign to Vatican II. Comparing Vatican II with Medellín, he writes:

"Vatican II speaks of the underdevelopment of peoples, of the developed countries and what they can and should do about this underdevelopment; Medellín tries to deal with the problem from the standpoint of the poor countries, characterizing them as subjected to a new kind of colonialism. Vatican II talks about a Church in the world and describes the relationship in a way which tends to neutralize the conflicts; Medellín demonstrates that the world in which the Latin American Church ought to be present is in full revolution. Vatican II sketches a general outline for Church renewal; Medellín provides guidelines for a transformation of the Church in terms of its presence on a continent of misery and injustice."<sup>3</sup>

There has been in Latin America during the past decade an ever growing consciousness about the need for the development of a native theology having its own distinctive perspective, and for the local Church to work out a more or less original course of action. Speaking in Buenos Aires in 1968, Enrique Dussel, another quite prominent Latin American theologian, recalls how a conversation he has earlier had with a German theologian reveals the contrast between Latin American and European theology: the former is preoccupied with the problem of human liberation, while the latter is discussing the question of papal infallibility, a question which has been triggered at the time in Europe by Hans Kung.<sup>4</sup> Like Gutierrez, Dussel believes that: "Vatican II itself was a reflection of postwar Euro-

3. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and edit. by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, London, 1974, p. 134.

4. Cf. Enrique Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, trans. by John Drury. New York, 1976, p. 30.

pean neocapitalism".<sup>5</sup> Latin American feeling of dissatisfaction with the general perspective of Vatican II is evident also in a very recent publication by Hector Borrat:

"For its European protagonists", he writes, "Vatican II coincides with an epoch of prosperity. The cold war ends, *détente* starts, the Common Market prospers.

... On the other side the Latin Americans have little motive for euphoria."<sup>6</sup>

The opinion expressed by the foregoing, so-called, theologians of liberation, should not be taken as a clear and sound proof of the present attitude of the Latin American Christian community toward the teaching of Vatican II. It is important to observe that the Latin American bishops in Puebla refrain from associating themselves, even in a general way, with the theology of liberation. While the Second Document shows a certain openness toward the fruitful elements in the theology of liberation,<sup>7</sup> the Final Document does not even mention the theology of liberation by name and notes only that theologians perform a very important function in the Church and that theological pluralism can be a healthy phenomenon, although it can also create divisions among the people.<sup>8</sup>

The distance (which does not mean hostility or even a lack of appreciation) between the episcopacy and theology in Latin America makes it even a more interesting exercise to try to see how far the Latin American bishops have gone in establishing a theological and pastoral perspective of their own. In other words, is the Latin American hierarchy merely repeating what it considers to be relevant texts from the Council documents or is it trying to work out a plan of action on its major problems in that continent of "misery and injustice", basing itself on the Gospel, the social teaching of the Church and its own particular experience?

A comparison between the teaching of Vatican II and Puebla on the question of Church and politics may help to give at least a partial answer to the foregoing problem. Besides, such a comparison may be extremely

5. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

6. Hector Borrat, *La Svolta: Chiesa e Politica Tra Medellin e Puebla*, trans. by Gaia Monti, Adelina Bartolomei, F. Gentiloni Silveri and revised by Luigi Bovo. Assisi, 1979, p. 3.

7. *Puebla, Documento Di Lavoro*, reproduced in P. Vanzan and A. Marranzini, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-448: Nos. 2231-2259. Enumeration of paragraphs is that used by Vanzan and Marranzini.

8. *Puebla: Final Document: Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America*. nos. 375-376. Enumeration of paragraphs is that used in the original text. Quotations are from the official English edition, published jointly by St. Paul Publications, Slough and the Catholic Institute for International Relations, London, 1980.

useful for local Churches, with a socio-political background quite different from that of the Church in postwar Europe, to discover alternative ways of looking at and solving, on the practical level, what has been in fact one of their complex problems, namely, the relationship of the Church with the political order.

### THE SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Church doctrine and theology can be properly understood and interpreted, only if they are seen in relation to their socio-historical context.

Vatican II presupposes a world in which men in general have become more aware of the fundamental rights of the person and of the need for individuals and nations to come closer to each other and to forge new relationships on the national, regional and international level, on the social as well as on the political plane. Of course, the Council acknowledges that part of mankind is living in poverty and injustice but, here also, it notes a ray of hope, because in the world today many disapprove the negative aspects of the present situation. One gets the impression that Vatican II does actually denounce the abuse of power, political as well as economic, but it does not represent a church which is experiencing directly the life of an oppressed people. This is natural, because the Church of Vatican II is 'partly' present in those countries which have been making progress at the expense of the so-called underdeveloped countries. The Church in developed countries "sees" the injustice but it is not actually "living" in a situation where people are deprived of their right to eat enough and have a decent accomodation, to go to school and learn to express their opinion freely.

Perhaps, the lack of a direct link with concrete situations of misery and injustice has led the Council to open its eyes chiefly to the worthy and noble elements in the contemporary socio-political situation. "The Church further recognizes" the Council says, "that worthy elements are found in today's social movements, especially an evolution toward unity, a process of wholesome socialization and of association in civic and economic values."<sup>9</sup> This new development in the consciousness of mankind about the fundamental rights of men is creating "a broader spirit of cooperation" and is enabling "all citizens, and not just a privileged few. . . to enjoy personal rights."<sup>10</sup> The Council forms a picture of the world which reflects the dark side of things but, on the whole, it is a picture

9. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 42. Unless otherwise indicated, the English translation of conciliar texts is from the edition of the Council Documents by Walter M. Abbott and Joseph Gallagher, London, 1967.

10. *ibid.*, art. 73.

which is meant to create in the observer a feeling of general optimism and to make him exclaim: "After all, the world in which we live is not as bad as we may have thought!"

At Puebla, the general feeling of the Church is different. Following the method of analysis adopted first by Pope John XXIII and then, more systematically, by Vatican II, the Conference of Latin American bishops singles out "the successes and failures of recent years."<sup>11</sup> Having perhaps a feeling that they are not going to delineate a rosey picture of the situation, the bishops note: "In presenting this reality, we are not trying to dishearten people but rather to stimulate all those who can do something to improve it."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the aim of the Church in Puebla is not simply one of describing but of helping to change a situation that needs to be changed.

The Document of Puebla is marked by a sharp sense of realism. Not satisfied with a merely general denunciation of the state of inhuman poverty in which "millions of Latin Americans live as the most devastating and humiliating kind of scourge,"<sup>13</sup> the Document tries to go to the root of the problem. In fact, it sees this state of alarming poverty as a product mainly, though not exclusively, of economic, social and political structures, including an international order, which permit the rich to get richer at the expense of the poor who get even poorer. This is a reality which involves not just personal conversion but "profound structural changes".<sup>14</sup>

The Document does not mince words, when it describes the specifically political situation. There are, it says, clear abuses of power, like systematic repressions, tortures, exiles, unaccountable disappearances of people, arrest and detention without a fair trial and the over-politicization of labour unions at the top level.<sup>15</sup> Besides, the Latin American bishops say that "recent years have seen a growing deterioration in the socio-political life of our countries."<sup>16</sup>

As Vatican II and Puebla presuppose a different kind of socio-political experience they frame the general problem of the Church in the world and, hence, of Church and politics in a different manner.

### THE GENERAL PROBLEM

Vatican II sees the problem of the Church's relationship to every

11. *Puebla: Final Document*, n. 15.

12. *ibid.*, n. 16.

13. *ibid.*, n. 29.

14. *ibid.*, n. 30.

15. *ibid.*, nos. 42-46.

16. *ibid.*, n. 507.

sphere of human activity in the context of the modern tendency to divorce faith from daily life. "This split between the faith which many profess", the Council remarks, "deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age."<sup>17</sup> Now the Church in Latin America is also aware of this fundamental problem. But it is experiencing it differently.

The Council confronts the problem of the relevance of faith to human life in the form which this problem has taken in Europe since the Enlightenment. This movement marks the beginning of a progressive emancipation of human activity from the direct influence of every religious authority. Men discover that the physical universe can be understood without the need to have recourse to the principle of final causality and so without the need to bring God into the picture. Men become convinced that they can govern themselves in all spheres of life in accordance with what they believe are purely rational norms, applicable to everybody, irrespective of one's religious convictions. In this way, God and his law become more and more irrelevant and the Church appears increasingly either as an outdated institution or something which is useful only as an agency of social service.<sup>18</sup>

Vatican II is preoccupied with the form which the problem of the relationship of faith to human activity has assumed in Europe. Its analysis of human activity takes into account, especially the achievements of men in the field of science and technology.<sup>19</sup> It shows appreciation for these achievements and recognizes that the scientific as well as the other fields of human activity enjoy a legitimate autonomy. God is not man's rival or competitor. He is the ultimate origin of being and value and has created man to be his intelligent and free collaborator in the ongoing work of creation.

When Vatican II discusses the connection of faith to man's problems, the problems that it considers are chiefly those arising in modern European culture. Foremost among them is the problem of the meaningfulness of human life, particularly a life of justice and love, in a world where death is unavoidable, while the threat of war and other social catastrophes remains a constant, distressing experience. Vatican II invites modern man, living in the materially more prosperous part of the world,

17. *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 43.

18. For the impact of the Enlightenment on Christianity see Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relationship of Protestantism to the Modern World*, trans. by W. Montgenmry, Boston, 1958, 2nd printing, 1966, esp. pp. 1-42, and also Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2nd Vol. trans. by Olive Wyon, New York, 1960. See also Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. by William Glen Doepel, London, 1969, pp. 108ff and *La Fede, Nella Storia e Nella Società*, trans. by Luciano Tosti, Brescia, 1978, pp. 22-53.

19. *Gaudium et Spes*, ch. III.

to see also the dark side of his life, especially death, in the light of the Gospel.<sup>20</sup> In so doing man can continue to think and act in a creative manner even in the context of the inescapable limitations of human nature and the radical as well as the pervasive presence of sin in the world.

The Latin American Church in Puebla has also in mind the same problem of the meaning of faith to human experience. But the experience of the Latin American Christian community, as we have seen, is very different from that of the Church in Europe and the other developed countries. Ten years ago Gustavo Gutierrez drew attention to the special form in which the problem of the relationship of faith to human activity was assuming in Latin America:

"The options which Christians in Latin America are taking have brought a fundamental question to the fore: What is the **meaning of the faith** in a life committed to the struggle against injustice and alienation? How do we relate the work of building a just society to the absolute value of the kingdom? For many the participation in the process of liberation causes a wearying, anguished, long and unbearable dichotomy between their life of faith and their revolutionary commitment."<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to note that the Final Document leaves out completely the long reference which the First Document makes to the problem of the relationship of faith to human activity as it has appeared and developed in Europe since the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Without ignoring the influence which strong intellectual movements, like the Enlightenment, has had on Latin American culture, the Church in Puebla apparently feels that its main religious problem is to explain, as clearly and effectively as possible, that faith in God implies necessarily a life of **commitment** to the liberation and promotion of man in all his dimensions.

## INTEGRAL LIBERATION AND HUMAN PROMOTION

The commitment to human liberation and promotion involves much more than pious appeals to social and political unity. The Latin American Church believes that only radical solutions can put an end to the oppressive conditions in which the majority of the population is living. And such solutions cannot overlook the fact that conflicts are meant to arise

20. *ibid.*, art. 18, 37-38.

21. G. Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p. 135. Italics in the original.

22. Cf. *Puebla. Documento Per La Consultazione* reproduced in P. Vanzan and A. Marranzini, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-105, nos. 357-368.

between those who wield power and those who are aspiring to a more human way of life. "We fully recognize", say the Latin American bishops, "the efforts undertaken by many Latin American Christians to explore the particularly conflict-ridden situations of our peoples in terms of the faith and to shed the light of God's Word on them."<sup>23</sup>

The Document of Puebla goes much further than Vatican II in describing the relationship of faith to socio-political activity. Vatican II says merely that earthly progress to the extent that it contributes to a qualitatively better social life is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God.<sup>24</sup> The Latin American Conference repeats this assertion<sup>25</sup> but it explores the problem of the relationship of faith to socio-political activity in a broader and, perhaps even a more precise, theological context.

The concept of **integral liberation**, first elucidated by the Medellín Conference, remains a key concept in Puebla.<sup>26</sup>

In his famous encyclical, **Populorum Progressio**, Paul VI speaks about integral development. Progress is human in so far as it is a change from "less human situations to more human ones".<sup>27</sup> It is integral, if it embraces the whole man and all men. The Medellín Conference substitutes the term **liberation** for **development**, because the former describes better the Latin American situation which is not simply one of underdevelopment but oppression. The peoples of Latin America cannot be seen as being on the way to development, as if their problem were just that of not having changed their economy to the new methods of production and marketing developed in the industrialized countries. They cannot move to a life which is really worthy of man by trying to imitate the developed countries. The latter should not be taken as their models, because they are, in fact, their oppressors. So no authentic economic and social progress is possible in Latin America, until this continent manages to free itself from the neocolonial situation in which it is being kept. Medellín uses the term **liberation**, precisely to underline the need of the Latin American people to break away from all that which is keeping it in a state of dependance and denying it the right to realize itself in freedom.<sup>28</sup>

The concept of liberation has had from the very beginning a socio-political connotation. Its use in a theological and pastoral context has given rise to a certain measure of ambiguity, as it has tended to reduce the content of Christian faith to one dimension and to distort the meaning of sin and grace by divesting them of their specifically theological (i.e.

23. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 470.

24. *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 31.

25. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 475.

26. *ibid.*, 480.

27. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 20; Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 16.

28. On this point see especially G. Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-99; 101-131.



transcendent) character. This danger seems to have increased considerably during the decade following Medellín. In fact, the Puebla Document notes the varying conceptions and applications of liberation. "Though they share common traits," it says, "they contain points of view that can hardly be brought together satisfactorily."<sup>29</sup>

Christian liberation involves liberation **from** all the forms of bondage which find their source in individual and collective egotism and liberation **to** an increasingly deeper life of communion with God and other human beings — a life which reaches its culmination in the world to come.

Puebla develops the emphasis of Medellín by relating the concept of liberation to that of human promotion, especially to the two values of **communion** and **participation** which have been recently gaining even greater prominence not only in ecclesial but also in civic life. This is how the Latin American Episcopal Conference describes the concept of human promotion:

"Human promotion entails activities that help to arouse human awareness in every dimension and to make human beings the active protagonists of their own human and Christian development. It educates people in living together, it gives impetus to organisation, it fosters Christian sharing of goods, and it is an effective aid to communion and participation."<sup>30</sup>

Within this general perspective, the proper freedom and competence of the laity in the work of evangelization and especially human promotion, already recognised by Vatican II,<sup>31</sup> are given foremost importance: "Clearly, then, it is the whole Christian community," says Puebla, "in communion with its legitimate pastors and guided by them, that is the responsible subject of evangelization, liberation and human promotion"<sup>32</sup>. Evangelization, liberation and human promotion are related in so far as they presuppose the inalienable right of all men to participate actively and directly in their own personal and social development. Puebla recalls that "the aim of liberative evangelization... is to transform human beings into active subjects of their own individual and communitarian development."<sup>33</sup>

There are therefore two main points that have to be kept in mind in order to understand and evaluate correctly what the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Puebla says about politics. The first is the awareness

29. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 481.

30. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 477.

31. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, ch. IV and *Apostolicam actuositatem*.

32. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 474.

33. *ibid.* n. 484.

of the Latin American Church that there is a growing deterioration in the socio-political life of the vast majority of the population. The second is the emphasis of the Latin American Church on the right of human beings to participate in a real way in their own individual and collective development.

### CHURCH AND POLITICS

Although there are, as we have seen, certain notable differences between Vatican II and Puebla, they share substantially a common perspective on the problem of the relationship of the Church to politics.

Vatican II as well as Puebla recognize the proper autonomy of the temporal order, including governments, political parties, labour unions, and other groups in the social and political arena.

Similarly, they both recall that the Church has a religious purpose which, of course, does not mean that it has absolutely no rôle to play in the socio-political sphere.<sup>34</sup>

According to Vatican II and Puebla, the rôle of the Church in the temporal order takes two distinct forms. The hierarchy and the laity, though they both form an essential part of the Church, have their own specific functions. This difference in function reflects itself in the way in which the Church makes itself actively present in the world.

### INDEPENDENCE FROM POLITICS BUT SOLIDARITY WITH THE PEOPLE

Vatican II and Puebla do not define the function of the hierarchy vis-à-vis politics merely in a negative manner by insisting that the hierarchy, including those in the religious life, should maintain a certain independence from politics. This renunciation of one's right to take a direct and active part in the political life of one's country is presented in a positive light, that is, as a necessary condition for the Church to be really a sign of union and reconciliation among men.<sup>35</sup>

Vatican II speaks of the independence of the hierarchy from "political systems";<sup>36</sup> Puebla speaks of independence from "party politics" — a notion which it explains clearly enough in this way:

"... the concrete performance of this fundamental political task is normally carried out by groups of citizens. They resolve to pursue and exercise political power in order to solve economic,

34. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, arts. 36, 42; Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 519.

35. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 42; Puebla, *Final Document*, nos. 526-7.

36. *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 42.

political and social problems in accordance with their own criteria or ideology. Here then we can talk about party politics."<sup>37</sup>

The involvement of the hierarchical Church in party politics makes the Church lose its meaning as a sign of unity among men and as a sign of the transcendence of human life. This latter point is evident in the teaching of Vatican II and perhaps even more so in the Document of Puebla. As they are called to be "men dedicated to the Absolute", priests and deacons (and *a fortiori* bishops) by their active militancy or leadership on behalf of a political party may easily give the impression that a particular ideology has something absolute about it. The absolutization of any ideology, Puebla insists, is wrong, because in politics (as well as in other fields of human activity) it is possible to have a variety of concrete options and no individual or group has the right to enforce his political vision as the only one desirable and possible.<sup>38</sup>

The problem arising in connection with the position of Vatican II and Puebla is this: Does not this lack of direct involvement, on the part of the hierarchical Church in the political order, lead to the absence of the Church from the place where concrete decisions are taken and specific programmes are worked out for the transformation of human life? This would be true, were the ministers of the Church not renouncing to a human right for a higher good, as it has already been explained, and were they not being in any way "interested in" and "committed to" a personal and social life based on justice, love and truth.

Vatican II speaks in a rather general way about the Church's (i.e. the hierarchy) concern with the socio-political development of the people. The Church, it says, "contributes to the wider application of justice and charity between nations" by showing and fostering, under the guidance of the Gospel, respect for political freedom and responsibility of the citizens.<sup>39</sup>

Puebla specifies the task of the hierarchy with respect to politics somewhat further. The Church helps to foster the values that should inspire politics, understood in a broad sense, as an activity seeking the common good on both the national and international plane, spelling out the fundamental values of every community and defining the ethics and means of social relationships.<sup>40</sup> The Church can foster these values only if it demonstrates, as Puebla says, solidarity with lay people who are directly res-

37. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 523.

38. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 76; Puebla, *Final Document*, nos. 523, 527.

39. *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 76.

40. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 521.

possible for concrete political decisions and courses of action.

### CRITICAL FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

Puebla helps us to interpret correctly the independence which, according to Vatican II, the Church has to keep from politics. It is an independence accompanied by a continued sense of the Church's solidarity with lay people.

This solidarity is shown by helping lay people to form a critical attitude toward political ideologies. Puebla moves further than Vatican II in its critical analysis of existing political ideologies. It addresses itself to the three main ideologies current in the Latin American continent; capitalist liberalism, Marxist collectivism (both of which were already treated by Medellín) and the doctrine of National Security.<sup>41</sup>

The critical analysis of ideologies is a task which the Church in Latin America has assumed with courage and a sense of respect toward the people's right to be aware of the oppressive conditions in which they are living. The development of a **critical consciousness**, to use a key term in the philosophy of education elaborated by the well-known Brazilian intellectual, Paulo Freire,<sup>42</sup> is an essential factor in the process of liberation,<sup>43</sup> because human beings tend to adapt themselves relatively easily even to situations which are not worthy of their dignity.

The Latin American Church both in Medellín and Puebla refuses to succumb to the illusion that the only possible options for the proper development of Latin America are either liberal capitalism or Marxism. "We must denounce the fact that Latin America finds itself caught between these two options and remains dependent on one or the other of the centres of power that control its economy."<sup>44</sup>

Puebla tries to go beyond the dilemma of having to propose a choice between two false political systems by pointing to the basic norm that should guide the political life of the country. Quoting from the opening address of Pope John Paul II, it declares that the Church chooses "to maintain its freedom with regard to the opposing systems in order to opt solely for the human being".<sup>45</sup> Guided by "the truth about human beings," Christians should try "to get beyond the hard and fast either or and to

41. *ibid.*, nos. 535-561.

42. Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. by Myra Bergmann Ramos, Penguin Books, London, 1972; *Education for Critical Consciousness*, London, 1974.

43. Gustavo Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-2; 114-7.

44. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 550; Puebla refers to Medellín's *Document on Justice*, n. 10.

45. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 551.

help build a new civilization that is just, fraternal, and open to the transcendent."<sup>46</sup>

Puebla discusses in the same context also the problem of violence.<sup>47</sup> In line with Vatican II and the whole Christian tradition, it rejects the use of violence.

"Our responsibility as Christians," it asserts, "is to use all possible means to promote the implementation of non-violent tactics in the effort to re-establish justice in economic and socio-political relations."<sup>48</sup>

This does not mean that the Christian posture should be one of resignation to the established order. In fact, it is significant to note that in the section on violence the Document of Puebla, like Vatican III, recommends strongly the use of non-violent tactics to change unjust social structures, without discussing and so, without rejecting, the use of force in certain circumstances.

Puebla does, of course, condemn explicitly terrorist and guerrilla violence, even when the purpose of such violence is liberation from injustice. This moral judgement, it seems, is based on the Church's consideration that terrorism and guerrilla warfare do not qualify as proportionate means to reach even a good end, because the evil they engender in the process is too serious to be tolerated.

Even more open is Puebla's condemnation of what Medellín and itself call "institutionalized injustice". This refers to social, political and economic systems and structures which privilege some and oppress others and perpetuate a state of dependence of the weaker on the stronger. They usually involve the persecution of dissidents by various means ranging from physical and psychological torture to exclusion from public life. Puebla condemns outrightly such a state of affairs, observing that very often it generates counter-violence.

Equally significant is Puebla's awareness that liberation and human promotion require an ongoing conversion of heart and mind, because "even the best structures and the most idealized systems quickly become inhuman, if human inclinations are not improved."<sup>49</sup> This last point anchors the social doctrine of the Church firmly in the Gospel tradition and differentiates it from the Marxist position which holds that the social problem can be radically and completely solved by changing the economic base and the super-structure of capitalist society.

This bold and unambiguous stand of the Latin American Church

46. *ibid.*, n. 551.

47. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 78.

48. Puebla, *Final Document*, n. 533.

49. *ibid.*, n. 509.

50. *ibid.*, n. 534.

against the political ideologies of the day would not have been possible had not the Church decided earlier to break its silence and show somehow its disapproval with the *status quo*.

Puebla knows too well that governments, with a totalitarian tendency, often try to use the Church for their own ends. The Church in Latin America is not asking for freedom to exercise its strictly religious functions. It demands the freedom to proclaim the Gospel with all its economic, social, cultural and political implications. If this right is denied or is not fully and properly exercised by the Christian community, the Church risks entering into "a kind of complicity with the established order."<sup>51</sup>

Hence, the emphasis which Puebla, following Vatican II, places on the independence of the Church from politics is not intended to remove the Church from the political field and make it concentrate on its specifically religious activities. The reason is rather that such independence is necessary for a **more creative** involvement of the Church in political activity. An independent Church, as far as this is humanly possible, can work more effectively on behalf of unity among people, having different ideologies and on behalf of politics itself by continuously reminding it of its relative and provisional character.

### THE CHURCH AND THE SEARCH FOR NEW POLITICAL OPTIONS

Besides criticizing and denouncing false political ideologies, Puebla acknowledges its duty to help the laity to explore new political options which are at the same time in line with the Gospel and adequate to promote a more human mode of life. The hierarchy, in fact is expected to demonstrate its solidarity with lay people in the execution of their political duties "by nurturing their creativity so that they can explore options that are increasingly in line with the common good and the needs of the weakest."<sup>52</sup>

To me it seems that by acknowledging its responsibility also for the concrete options taken by the people in the socio-political order, the Church in Puebla is again correcting one of the unfortunately more common misinterpretations of the teaching of Vatican II. According to the latter, the laity should act on their own initiative and responsibility in the secular realm and they must not expect the hierarchy to give them specific answers to all their problems. Some seem to think that this position means that the hierarchy should at most give only some very general

51. *ibid.*, n. 558.

52. *ibid.*, n. 525.

principles and leave the laity not only to apply these principles in practice but also to bear the consequences of what they choose to do following a duly enlightened Christian conscience. Puebla does not interpret Vatican II in this rather one-sided and simplistic manner. It wants lay people to take an active and direct part in temporal affairs, because that is their proper vocation. But it does not abdicate its responsibility to help concretely lay people in the transformation of life in the world, by being close to them and, as "an expert in humanity", sharing with them the task of searching continuously for new concrete forms of authentic human living.

### **THE ROAD AHEAD**

The Latin American Episcopal Conference in Puebla remains within the general framework of the Council's doctrine on Church and politics. Yet, it speaks from a different cultural, political and social background and although it confronts, like Vatican II, the problem of the relationship between faith and human experience, it does so in a somewhat different way. The Document of Puebla is important because of the creative interpretation that it gives of the conciliar teaching. In fact, it insists on the need of the hierarchical Church to keep a certain distance from party politics but it tries to bring out as clearly as possible the purpose of all this. The reason is not so much that the function of the Church is purely religious as that the Church can serve as a symbol of unity and reconciliation among men, if it does not associate itself with particular political ideologies.

The independence of the Church from political ideologies is also necessary in order that the Church may be free to criticize such ideologies when they tend to hinder the integral development of man.

The distance of the Church from politics has, therefore, a positive significance. It is intended to give the Church a better opportunity to serve man not merely as a spiritual, but also as a social and political being. Perhaps, because it is conscious enough that a Church trying to keep away from politics may very easily isolate itself from the socio-political reality, the Latin American Church in Puebla insists on its solidarity with the people, above all, with the poor and the oppressed.

The road ahead for the Church in Latin America and elsewhere is precisely that of testing the validity of its ideas about politics on the concrete and practical level. It is only on that level that one sees both the strength and weakness of a particular theory.