

Vatican II in Latin America

When I first went to Latin America to study the Catholic Church almost a half century ago in 1970, the impacts of Vatican II were already visible. Some were direct, others mediated through the landmark conference of the region's Catholic Bishops at Medellin in 1968. The Council itself provided an opportunity for widely scattered bishops to meet one another and compare notes. This was a relatively new experience, reinforced by the impetus the Council gave to national and regional church organizations. These have developed greatly since those early days, providing the hierarchy (and other groups like confederations of religious men and women) a much greater capacity for common action and much more information with which to work. There was also a notable opening to social science and history as valuable sources of information. The impetus of Medellin has been carried forward in subsequent regional meetings (Puebla 1978, Santo Domingo 1992, Aparecida, 2007) each with its own particular emphasis.

Of course there is more to the church than what bishops and clergy think and do. Vatican II also had a major impact on ordinary believers, and on the way in which they did and could participate, and on religious groups in civil society, and their relation to the hierarchy. The translation of liturgies into local languages (Spanish and Portuguese) and the growing openness to Bible studies made participation much more accessible and meaningful for many, and religiously linked and identified groups more autonomous. The profusion of bible centered groups like base ecclesial communities or CEBS is a direct outgrowth of the Council. The model of the Church as Pilgrim People, living in and working its way through history, has had a profound influence, enhancing the value of ordinary experience and shifting the basis of reflection from deductive reasoning to reflections on experience. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez points to both of these in his stress on the idea that there is one history (not human history now and sacred history later, but one continuing experience illuminated and guided by faith), and in his definition of theology as second act (experience is first, theology is reflection).

Vatican II of course had a major impact, but it did not create change all by itself. The debates and documents of the Council drew on, legitimized, and enhanced currents of that were already bubbling up throughout the region. The experience of liberation theology is a case in point. The first book with the title *Liberation Theology* (published in Lima Peru in 1971) was itself the fruit of a series of meetings, pastoral weeks, and theological discussion across the region). Gustavo Gutierrez and his colleagues and associates were also very influential in drafting the documents of Medellin, which helped progressive social action in the region. The official title of the Medellin meetings says a lot: "The role of the Church in the present day transformation of Latin America in the light of the Council". At Medellin bishops and advisors (*periti*) carried forward core ideas from the Council, in particular ideas about social justice, violence (the famous notion of institutionalized violence) and participation. The intense atmosphere of contention, violence and repression of the years following Medellin took a significant toll on the Church with many victims including bishops, clergy, sisters and ordinary faithful. Notable among these is of course Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, recently beatified.

The impact of the Council has not been without controversy, often intense, but its core value has been recognized and reasserted with vigor by Pope Francis. Of course much has changed in the last half century, and the Church now faces many challenges that were not on the radar at the time the Council closed. Many are part of the general experience of the Church in much of the world; some are particular to Latin America. A partial list would have to include the following: the status and role of women, addressing sexual abuse and accountability, new issues about sexuality including same sex marriage and end to discrimination against homosexuals, addressing the vigorous expansion of Protestant and Pentecostal churches and the resulting loss of “market share” for the Catholic church, responding to new and deadly expressions of violence (including drugs, gang wars, abuse of migrants), sorting out the relation of civil society groups to the institutional church, the status of universities, and how to deal effectively with new forms of communication, including TV and the internet. The Council led the way with its openness to participating in the modern world, with all its hopes and joys: not a defensive stance but an open engagement. This is the path emphasized again by Pope Francis. Maintaining it is the task of the future.

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