

Becoming a local church in order to be a universal Church

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138 years ago, Benedictine Father Pius Bonifatius Gams published the first comprehensive survey of all the dioceses of the Catholic Church, complete with statistics.²⁹³ This handbook of Church studies remained without parallel until the twentieth century. It provides an overview of the Church in Latin America in 37 pages. In 1873, there were no more than 80 Latin American dioceses, 12 of them in Brazil and 68 in all the former Spanish colonies put together. It took Father Gams 72 pages, more than twice as many as he needed for the whole of Latin America, to describe the Church in “Germania”.²⁹⁴ At the end of 2009, Latin America and the Caribbean counted 812 jurisdictions (including the exarchates and eparchies of the Orthodox Churches)²⁹⁵, a tenfold increase since 1873. Such an expansion brings with it a change in quality, not just in quantity. A dialogue among local churches requires, among other things, proximity: a neighbour must be within hailing distance if a dialogue is to take place. Outside the ports and the few major cities, however, it was not only the missionaries “on the edge of civilisation” who were living an almost insular existence in the midst of the continent, but also most of the bishops, parish priests and nuns in the Andes mountains, the great forests and the pampas (whose lonely expanse became proverbial).

Priests who had 50,000 believers to take care of in three dozen subsidiary churches and chapels (if you can call it ‘caring’ when the

²⁹³ Gams, P. B., *Series Episcoporum Ecclesiae Catholicae quotquot innotuerunt a beato Petro apostolo*, Regensburg 1873.

²⁹⁴ It should be borne in mind that ‘Germania’ meant all the German-speaking countries: the German Empire (including Strasbourg and Metz), the Austrian half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and the dioceses dominated by German-speaking populations, such as Riga and Reval (now Tallinn).

²⁹⁵ See *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae 2009*, Città del Vaticano 2011, 35-38.

numbers were so huge!) were by no means exceptional. Sometimes they could only visit the outposts once a year, on the patron saint's day. Gradually, throughout the 20th century, the local churches in both the dioceses and the parishes increased in density in a process of institutional expansion brought about by dividing up larger parishes and founding new ones. The intensification of Church organisation in Latin America is the exact opposite of the extension process involving the closing of churches and linking of parishes that the Catholic Church in Germany has opted for, or had to opt to, in the past two decades, usually in response to declining numbers of believers and/or priests.

The Church network in Latin America has had a wide mesh for a long time. But there is another, even weightier reason why, until the 20th century, the Church there could be described as a "local church" only in a limited sense. It was "local" not just because it was in Latin America. From its conception, the Church in the New World continued to relate to the Old World for a very long time. For three centuries under Spanish rule, decisions in matters of Church governance were made by the King in Madrid, his "Indian Council" (Consejo de Indias) for the American colonies, and the viceroys, governors and authorities on the ground. Rome was the point of reference, principally (at times, almost exclusively) on theological issues. When South and Central America liberated themselves from Spain and Portugal 200 years ago, the only entity that was preserved was Brazil. The Spanish colonial possessions, by contrast, gradually disintegrated into 18 states. In whatever country, the sense of nationhood was uppermost. Nobody felt "Latin American" (apart from Simón Bolívar). Moreover, the Catholic Church felt besieged by the liberal bourgeoisie in almost all of the young states. The quest for support strengthened the Church's orientation towards Rome.

It is hardly surprising that the first "Plenary Council" in 1899, the first ever meeting of Latin American bishops, took place in Rome. This was not so much the result of their own initiative; with the invitation from Leo XIII, the agenda was set by the Holy See and the proceedings were of course in Latin, not Spanish.²⁹⁶ The conference

²⁹⁶ See Pontifica Commissio pro America Latina – CAL (ed.) *Los últimos cien años de la Evangelización en América Latina. Simposio Histórico, Actas. Ciudad del Vaticano, 21-25 de junio de 1999*, Città del Vaticano 2000; Josep-Ignasi Saranyana, *Cien años de Teología*

venue was the Latin American College, the seminary founded in 1858 for priests studying in Rome, where most of the bishops had been trained and through which they remained allied. It is called Colegio Pío Latino-Americano in Spanish (Collegio Pio Latino Americano in Italian) and for a century and a half it has contributed a great deal to the slowly-emerging sense of unity in the Church of Latin America.²⁹⁷

A local church evolves through the forging of links, not through demarcation and a retreat to home ground. Horizontal links sit uneasily in hierarchical structures, however. For example, the Christmas collection in the Archdiocese of Cologne in 1954 was taken up for the Archdiocese of Tokyo and a partnership arose as a result; this was a “novissimum”. Innovations aroused distrust in many people in the Vatican Curia at that time. This was because mission, and contact with the Church in a non-Catholic country, was traditionally regarded as Rome’s prerogative. Direct relationships between one local church and another, instead of via Rome, “were unseemly”.²⁹⁸

The Latin American Episcopal Conference CELAM and its significance in the continental local church

The Plenary Council of 1899 was the end of the matter for half a century. Figuratively speaking, the Church in Latin America during the first half of the 20th century saw itself more as a collection of railway tracks converging on and culminating in the Vatican than as a network. That situation came to an end in 1955, for the first time a conference was held “on home territory”. The 35th International Eucharistic Congress in Rio de Janeiro was followed by the first General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopate which took place thanks to the decisive involvement of Dom Helder Camara, Suffragan Bishop of Rio de Janeiro. More importantly, the conference was not the end of the story. It passed a milestone resolution not to continue having meetings as random occurrences but to give the Church in Latin

en América Latina (1899-2001), CELAM series, Colección Quinta Conferencia, Historia, Bogotá 2005.

²⁹⁷ See Medina Ascensio, L., *Historia del Colegio Pío Latino Americano (Roma: 1858-1978)*, México D.F. 1979.

²⁹⁸ Toscer, S., *Les Catholiques Allemands à la Conquête du Développement*, Paris 1997, 6-71.

America a structure and to ask the Holy Father to set up a Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) with a secretariat in Rome. Pius XII agreed, albeit with one wise alteration: the headquarters was to be in Latin America. It was decided that this should be in the Colombian capital, Santa fé de Bogotá.

The quick succession of Bishops' Conferences held in the early 1950s paved the way for the founding of CELAM. Previously, bishops' conferences had existed in very few countries, such as Mexico (since 1900) and Colombia (since 1908), in other words where attacks on the Church by the state had required the episcopates to stand by each other. To paraphrase Hegel, it might actually be a cunning trick of historical reason that creates local churches. The Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB), the Brazilian Bishops' Conference, was founded in 1952, but the process had been set in motion in 1950 by Helder Camara and Prelate Giovanni Montini, who at that time was Substitute in the Vatican Secretariat of State. From then on, a deep lifelong friendship united Helder Camara and the later, great Pope Paul VI.

The formation of CELAM was certainly the work of Dom Helder Camara, but its emergence was also due to the untiring efforts of two other prominent figures: Bishop Manuel Larraín Errázuriz of Talca (Chile) and Archbishop Antonio Samoré, nuncio in Colombia since 1950. Getting the Church together in Latin America was a cause close to his heart. It irritated him that many bishops preferred to turn to the Holy See on pastoral issues rather than discussing them with their neighbouring bishops.

The founding of CELAM was both a local church and a Latin American event. Half a century later the then president of CELAM, Francisco Javier Cardinal Errázuriz Ossa, reminded people that CELAM was "one of the first inter-American amalgamations" of any kind.²⁹⁹ It soon became evident that the founding of CELAM was also a major event for the universal Church. Not only did CELAM provide a model for future bishops' conferences in Africa (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, SECAM/

²⁹⁹ Errázuriz Ossa, F.J., "Welcoming address at the retirement of Prelate Dr. Dieter Spelthahn and the installation of the Rev. Bernd Klaschka as Managing Director of the Catholic welfare organisation Adveniat, Essen, 28 May 2004", MS, Adveniat archive.

SCEAM, founded in 1969), Asia (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, FABC, founded 1970) and Europe. Above all, CELAM plays an incomparably greater role for the Church in Latin America than SECAM and FABC do in their respective continents. CELAM consists of 22 Bishops' Conferences, 21 of which are national (19 of them Spanish-speaking) plus the Antilles Episcopal Conference, whose members are the bishops from the British, Dutch and French possessions in the Caribbean and their former colonies. Every four years CELAM draws up an action plan, which is always very detailed and is not a mere paper exercise. In a surprising number of the Spanish-speaking countries, the Bishops' Conferences base their own pastoral plan on CELAM's 'Plan Global'.

The situation in Brazil is different, which is due not so much to the language gap as to the special position of the CNBB, which has 444 bishops³⁰⁰ and is thus the second-largest bishops' conference in the world after Italy. What CNBB can offer to forums for exchanges of experience, training courses, publications, etc. is no less comprehensive than what CELAM can provide. And in a good many fields of pastoral care CNBB sees itself – rightly or sometimes wrongly – as the vanguard for the whole of Latin America.

Haiti has frequently been “left behind” not just for linguistic reasons but also, in particular, because of the very limited working opportunities for the Conférence Épiscopale d’Haïti. This was the case even before the devastating earthquake in 12 January 2010. There are shortages of staff, infrastructure, and communication – in short, of everything.

CELAM's contribution and achievement consists in giving the many local churches' initiatives (in the sense of dioceses and/or bishops' conferences) a dimension of continental church breadth, so that each strengthens the other in the faith, as well as ideas and suggestions for the many tasks the Church has to address in the 21st century: building bridges between Latin American cultures and the European tradition (the key term here is indigenous theology), pastoral care in the mega-cities, the ecumenical movement with sister churches, and the debate with the neo-Pentecostal movement.

³⁰⁰ See *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae 2009*, Città del Vaticano 2011, 95.

Continental church activity of this kind is significant first and foremost on a practical level through the internal local church duties, i.e. the kind that CELAM performs for the bishops' conferences and the bishops' conferences for the dioceses – and vice versa; dioceses setting an example to a whole country in various fields of pastoral care: the Bible apostolate, pastoral care of young people, pastoral care of prisoners, pastoral care of migrants *inter alia* (this happens in Germany too) or initiatives by one bishops' conference that are then taken over by neighbouring ones (this very seldom happens in Europe). Continental church activity is also significant on a theological level, however. At their third general assembly in Puebla (Mexico) in 1979 the Latin American bishops decided, true to the pioneering second general assembly of 1968 in Medellín, Colombia, to adopt as their guideline for the Church's apostolate the "priority option for the poor": in the discipleship of Jesus the Church must not wash its hands in innocence when confronted with poverty and injustice, but must take action. In addition, though this is not public knowledge to the same extent, they committed themselves to four further options, including the "Option for the particular church"³⁰¹, in launching a 'rediscovery'³⁰² of the Second Vatican Council. This had emphasised "cum Petro et sub Petro" the responsibility of every single bishop and every single local church: every single bishop and every single area church must walk *their* road of discipleship in the Spirit of God. They must not be content with implementing guidelines from Rome. This does not happen without conflicts ensuing. If, for example, a bishop is no longer living out the option for the poor in his diocese, to which his predecessor had committed his local church at Puebla, then the option for a particular church (as that bishop is exercising it) comes into opposition with the option for the poor (being the option of the continental local church). If the Latin American local church cannot cope with the strain of internal conflicts, things that start as local church conflicts are eventually taken to Rome. This is what happened with the battle over liberation theology.

³⁰¹ Boff, L., "Puebla aus der Sicht des unterdrückten Lateinamerika", in: *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 64 (1980) vol.3, 161-191, quote 170.

³⁰² Saviano, B., *Fraternidad und Adveniat – Grundlagen, Erfahrungen und Herausforderungen*, MS, 2003, Adveniat archive.

Religious orders paving the way for a South-South exchange

The Confederación Latinoamericana de Religiosos (CLAR) – the Latin American Confederation of Religious Orders – has been more successful than some of the bishops' conferences in living out diversity in unity and unity in diversity. This is another reason why it is impossible to overestimate the role played by the orders in the formation of a Latin American church out of local churches. All along, the monks and nuns were the people who never thought within borders. The hurdle that was to prove the highest for some missionary orders originating in Europe and North America was the threshold of inculturation. By that I do not mean the threshold at which an individual missionary was absorbed into the culture in which he or she was working (most of them managed this), i.e. “outgoing inculturation”, but rather “incoming inculturation”: the threshold of willingness to admit people into one's own congregation. Cardinal Errázuriz illustrated this once by quoting something he had heard still being said when he was a student: If a community starts to let natives in, its decadence has begun.

More than half a millennium after the first Franciscans and Dominicans arrived in the New World the era of a constant influx of European monks and nuns seems to be coming to an end. A new movement has begun: monks and nuns from Latin America are active in Africa; it was Brazilians who made a start in Angola and Mozambique, united by a common language. Conversely, to name but a few examples from the Caribbean, there are monks and nuns from the Congo and the Philippines working in Haiti, from Nigeria in Trinidad and French Guyana (Guyane), and from India in Jamaica and St. Lucia, not to mention the inter-American exchange of Haitians in Brazil and Brazilians in Haiti.

Since the 1980s the religious orders have been leading the way in the South-South exchange. Conducted among and by the churches, the South-South exchange is both a facet and a consequence of globalisation. It is one of the most exciting developments in recent Church history in general. The churches in the continents of the South are not only enriching the churches in the North, but also – and above all – they are enriching each other (something we are only rarely aware of), be it personally or theologically, through their experiences of inculturation. Many roads lead to and via Rome. But in the meantime

many more roads unite the Christians of the southern hemisphere directly with each other.

The flourishing South-South exchange is not a domain of the Catholic Church; it just happened to start there earlier. Beyond the edges of Catholic perception, the Pentecostal movement is spreading with extraordinary dynamism among the southern continents by means of transcultural mission as well as to Europe as a result of migration from the southern hemisphere.

But to get back to Latin America, here are two concluding examples to show how local churches are becoming the Church of Christ by transcending borders and supporting each other.

Two local churches overcome the gulf of history and reservations

While more than a million Dominicans were emigrating to the USA in the hope of a better life, almost as many Haitians were immigrating into the Dominican Republic. It is the destitution of their homeland and the struggle for sheer survival that drives them out. Since almost all of them are “illegal”, smuggled across the border by traffickers (*boukonn* in Creole, *buscones* in Spanish), they can be exploited in all kinds of ways. They are housed in wretched shanty settlements, called *bateyes*. Having no rights and no protection, they can hardly dare to rebel, but have to cower instead. In tandem with the ups and down of the economy, Haitians are smuggled in – or picked up in raids and “repatriated”, i.e. deported, overnight on a whim and without any kind of trial. Parents are left behind without children and children without parents, depending on who was the first to fall into the hands of the “security forces”. The number of raids multiplies before elections, when the parties compete to show who is the most zealous in dealing with the “intruders” and who is best at preserving the *limpeza de sangre*, the purity of the blood. Human dignity is infringed.³⁰³

Many bishops, priests and lay people find themselves split between fear of foreigners and the Catholicism of the universal Church (which comes very, very close to them in the Haitian brothers and sisters),

³⁰³ A good, and impressive, insight into the situation of the Haitians in the Dominican Republic and the debates conducted in Haitian politics is given in Issue 144 (October-December 2004) of the journal *Estudios Sociales*, published in Santo Domingo.

between the commandment to love one's neighbour and the "national interest". It still happens that children are refused baptism so that the door to citizenship is not opened up by virtue of the baptism certificate. It is not all that long ago that a bishop approved of pregnant Haitian women being deported so that they could not gain the right to stay via their children.

Despite such bitter experiences, a growing flock of Catholics has started looking after the Haitians. In the dioceses on the border it is hard to imagine life without the *Pastoral Haitiana*, including rights counselling. Tireless admonishers in defence of human rights, even for Haitians, were the Flemish Fathers of the Congregatie van het Onbevekt Hart van Maria (CICM) and the Jesuits. A major step in terms of both Dominican and Church history was the account taken of the Haitians living in the country at the First National Council in 2000³⁰⁴. The bishops' conference set up a committee for the *Pastoral Haitiana*, which expressed its carefully balanced view on the "Haitian question".³⁰⁵ The fact that, after considerable initial reservations, the two bishops' conferences on the one island were prepared to hold joint conferences was a hopeful sign (and it was the Dominicans who had to make the greater effort). New links were established after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 and thanks to the impressive aid that flowed in from the neighbouring country. It will remain a touchstone for the Church in the Dominican Republic whether it treats "its" Haitians as it treats Christ Himself.

Engaging in partnership

Another encouraging sign is the growing number of examples of sharing in the churches of the South. In many campaigns, such as in Chile, attention is focussed on endeavouring to secure a greater amount of self-financing. After decades of abundant aid from the churches of the North there is a threat of crippling habituation. The then deputy head of Adveniat, Bernhard Steber, wrote self-critically:

³⁰⁴ Conferencia del Episcopado Dominicano (ed.), *Primer Concilio Plenario Dominicano*, Santo Domingo 2000.

³⁰⁵ See, for example, the explanation *La presencia de haitianos en República Dominicana. Ante la creciente inmigración haitiana*, printed in three parts in the daily *Listin Diario* (Santo Domingo), 3, 4 and 5 November 2005.

“We have come to a standstill at an early stage in our relations with local churches in Latin America. Our numerous projects help us to fulfil the wishes of the local church (in the manner of Christmas presents). This is tending to impede the process the Church in Latin America must undergo on its way to independence from us. Are we not generating dependence through our aid? It’s so easy to get aid from dear old Adveniat!”³⁰⁶

In other campaigns, such as the “Plan Compartir” in Argentina, the intention is also to practise the attitude of sharing, of becoming partners with each other. The word partner, going back to the Latin root, designates somebody with whom I share (**participate**), whether in a burden or a responsibility. Participation is different from dependence. There are two similar initiatives in Brazil, the “Campanha da Fraternidade” (Campaign of Brotherliness), a Lent campaign comparable to Misereor, and the *dízimo* movement (*dízimo* = tenth, which is not taken literally, but reminds believers that they must first give so that their church can pass on and give back).

In Brazil an annual nationwide collection for Amazonia has been included. The campaign for it confronts Brazilians with the crass differences in wealth and poverty within their own country. Quite apart from financial support, a large number of dioceses in the south of Brazil have “adopted” dioceses in the north of the country, which they support with aid in the form of staff, by sending priests and lay people.

The one thing that is taking time to develop is a cross-national, internal Latin American exchange. Although it has frequently been announced by CELAM, there is still no “Latin American Adveniat”. However strong solidarity is within a particular country, the Catholicism of many local churches reaches its limits at the border. This experience is Catholic, too; even local Christians sometimes feel that charity begins at home. Until they begin to take notice and understand that too much local spirit is not good for a local church. After all, to repeat the point, we are Catholics too. Leafing through old Father Gams’ survey reminds us of that.

³⁰⁶ Steber, B., “Unordentliche Gedanken” on Adveniat, MS 1995, Adveniat archive.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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