



# Council 50

Towards a Church-Inspired by the Gospel-for the world  
Rumbo hacia una Iglesia-inspirada en el Evangelio-para el mundo  
Vers une Eglise-inspirée par l'Évangile-pour le monde  
Verso una Chiesa ispirata dal Vangelo per il mondo

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## Reception of Vatican II and Renovation of the Church in Latin America & the Caribbean Region

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### Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean is a big region and the continent with the largest catholic population in the world but its practice, experiences and processes vary very much. I am basing my statements on the reception of Vatican II in Latin America and what derived from it.

### Reception of Vatican II: Medellin & The church of the Poor

Latin America was the continent that had the best reception of Vatican II. It called for a General Assembly of Bishops which took place in 1968 in Medellin, Colombia. This Conference profited in a positive sense from the many liberation processes that were already present in the continent. Medellin listened to the cries of the poor, that was its main focus and its turning point: The church of Latin America would affirm itself as the church of the poor.

Let us not forget that the Church of Latin American even though being the largest in number was not really accounted for in Rome. Its voice was not heard. It is in Medellin that it affirmed itself in a prophetic way and 10 years later, reaffirmed its option for the poor in the Puebla Conference (1979) where already there was interference from the representatives from Rome and much worse 10 years later in Sto. Domingo (1989) and was able finally able to move forward in Aparecida (2007) not without obstacles.

During these decades the church of the poor shaped itself and its best expression are the Base Ecclesial Communities which Medellin recognized as the first level of the church structure thus placing them in the sacramental being of the Church.

The church of the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean has suffered much and it counts with many martyrs and many from the Base Communities in a fate similar to that of the early Church. We have many lay men and women, bishops, priests, sisters whose lives have been abruptly ended shedding their blood for all of us.

The church of the poor continues to be that of martyrs, witnesses, prophets, liberation theologians whose articulation principle of their writings are the poor, the impoverished, the marginalized and the excluded.

It is the church of Christian communities open to live the Gospel and to hear and respond to today's needs. All of this has concrete situations, faces, struggles. We can think of Haiti as the most impoverished nation of the continent yet in the latest diocesan gathering in Jeremie this year, people brought rice, beans, bananas to share, the dancing to the drums was as joyful as if they had no worry in the world, and the communities are full of young people committed in small projects to improve their lives.

## **RENOVATION OF THE CHURCH**

The Church of Latin America willingly accepted the term of Vatican II **the people of God**. This term implies horizontality and inclusiveness; we are all people of God with equal dignity and with different services and ministries, none above the other. No one is to be left out. The Ecclesial Base communities have put this into action and were widely appreciated and later on criticized, ignored, persecuted.

Yet **now** is a different context we must move on, and now is the time to rekindle their being, to let themselves be modified, to allow the Spirit to push forward being faithful to their call of being community among the poor and to go and form community where others will not go. It is a time of deep renovation.

The services of the communities have never been approved by any canonical law which has worked to their benefit as they are free to invent new ministries according to the needs of today for example ministry of solidarity, ministry of dialogue and ecumenism, ministry of peace, ministry of human rights, ministry of shelter to the migrants, service of culture and art...

True enough almost all official ministries are centered on the ordained priest and this has to change, there has to be decentralization but how to go about it? We have to trust and listen to the Spirit for there are unforeseen twists in history that allows change to happen. The Spirit is trying to tell us something with different signs, take for example the almost worldwide dwindling of vocations... Is it perhaps to stress more what binds us beyond our founding charisms? Or to allow a much needed change in the ordained ministry of priests? Will it be possible to have more **intercongregational projects** (sisters, priests, brothers and lay women and men) to attend the needs and cries of the poor (migration, extreme poverty, human trafficking, climate change which affects women and children the most, defense of territories, indigenous populations, the earth as a living being, human rights...) Will we be able to dialogue inter-generations, inter faith, intercultural, inter religious, inter institutional?

The whole hierarchical structure of the church has to change for it is there that lays the power and the wealth that keeps it away from its true mission. From the actual seminaries all the way to the top radical changes need to be made; but we, as church of the poor, make changes at the bottom, that is our privileged place of work and we do not do it alone but also with other organizations, popular movements who cherish and appreciate what we bring: hope, faith,

spirituality and also other tools. We live a permanent tension between two realities and many times we feel torn in the struggles, yet the greatest renovation of the church has been brought about by the most humble, take St. Francis or the pact of the catacombs, or the base communities or Romero, faithful and yet with a different proposal.

The reading of the Word of God in community and putting it into practice also as community has been one of the fruits of the church of the poor. That is why they feel impelled to follow Jesus and his project the kingdom of God. This has been a gift of the Spirit through the work of so many agents who have listened to what is revealed to the humble and meek. In order to renovate our church this work has to continue with new perspectives.

The Latin American Church is young and has a prophetic legacy that never faded out, although at times it almost seemed to be the case, so we must carry on and listen carefully to the Spirit in order to move forward and respond to the cries of the poor in today's reality. We have to go beyond our limited analyses and lack of hope. We are experimenting a new time with Pope Francis that we never expected to see and yet it happened and it is the time to move on for the church of the poor is a sign of the Spirit.