REMEMBERING THE MEDELLÍN CONFERENCE

In August of 1968, two and a half years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, representatives from every Catholic Bishops Conference in Central and South America and the Caribbean met in Medellín, Colombia. Their purpose was to apply the vision and directives of the Council to society and churches in that region of the world.

What emerged from that historic Conference was a series of documents that looked anew at every aspect of Latin American life and offered pastoral responses to each situation. Under the overall title, "The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council", the bishops made it clear that the Institutional Church in Central and South America and in the Caribbean was making a conscious and historic choice: to situate the whole Church – the People of God in Latin America – on the side of the poorest sectors of those societies.

A brief listing of the issue areas addressed by the bishops (together with theologians and pastoral workers as advisors) at Medellín reveals a broad-gauged examination of conscience regarding the role of the Latin American Church. Under the rubric of "human promotion", for example, the Conference took up issues of justice, peace, family and demography, education, and youth. Under "evangelization and growth in the faith" they looked at lay movements, priests, religious, formation of the clergy, poverty of the Church, joint pastoral planning and mass media. Virtually no area of Church or secular life remained unexamined at Medellín.

METHODOLOGY: A LIBERATIVE PRAXIS

The methodology employed at the Medellín Conference coincided with that of Liberation Theology, which was just then appearing on the horizon in the Latin American Church. A rigorous social analysis of each area under review, followed by scriptural and pastoral reflections on those analyses concluded with a set of guidelines, pastoral approaches, and actions to be taken. It was a "bottom up" approach which moved from practice to theory and back to practice. The method came to be known as "the circle of praxis", another way of describing the older process of "observe, judge, and act".

Perhaps some specifics from the various Medellín documents will give a sense of the depth and truly revolutionary nature of this Spirit-led Conference.

"The Church in Latin America should be manifested, in an increasingly clear manner, as truly poor, missionary and paschal, separate from all temporal power and courageously committed to the liberation of each and every man [sic]"(5, 15).*

"We want our Latin American Church to be free from temporal ties, from intrigues and from a doubtful reputation… so that her mission of service will be stronger and clearer" (14, 18).*

"The traditionalists or conservatives show little or no social conscience, have a middle-class orientation and consequently do not question the social structures… in general they are primarily concerned with preserving their privileges which they identify with the 'established order'" (7,6).*

BACKGROUNDER: MEDELLÍN CONFERENCE

Clearly, what happened at the Medellín Conference was that the bishops of Latin America chose the Reign of God over the status and security of the Institutional Church. They rolled the dice, so to speak, in favor of the values of God's kingdom, risking the historical power and prestige which the Church had enjoyed in that part of the world for centuries. The phrase "preferential option for the poor", which never actually appears in the Medellín Documents, came to summarize the bishops' challenge to the entire household of faith in Latin America – laity, religious, clergy, and episcopacy.

It was a sea-change for that institution and had far-reaching effects. Within ten years of the Medellín Conference fully a thousand pastoral ministers – mostly lay catechists – had suffered martyrdom for the "crime" of implementing the pastoral guidelines set out in those documents. Those guidelines challenged and shook not only church structures, but more importantly questioned and subverted the terribly unjust status quo of Latin American societies which had trapped the vast majority of people there in what Pope Paul VI called "the vicious cycle of poverty."

Now, nearly half a century since the Medellín event and its aftermath, one asks if its spirit is still alive. Despite a perhaps inevitable mitigation of the cutting-edge nature of that spirit, abetted by the seemingly intentional replacement of Medellín-type bishops with less visionary, not to say less courageous, hierarchs, Medellín lives. It has soaked into the soil – the DNA – of the Church at the grass-roots in Latin America. More broadly, the vision of a "preferential option for the poor" has spread to other areas of church life as well. Virtually every religious congregation of women and men in the world has in one way or another called its members to such a choice personally and corporately. Like the Second Vatican Council itself, Medellín can no more be forgotten or suppressed than can toothpaste be put back into the tube. It has been a gift from the Latin American Church to the Universal Church.

*Text adapted from "Birth of a Church" by J. Nangle, OFM. ORBIS Books, 2004; and "Engaged Spirituality: Faith Life in the Heart of the Empire" by J. Nangle OFM. ORBIS Books, 2008.

*Quotes from "The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council" Official English Edition of Latin American Bureau, Division for Latin America, Department of International Affairs, United States Catholic Conference and the General Secretariat of CELAM.

A REFLECTION FROM A PARISH PRIEST

As an active young pastor in Lima, Peru before, during, and after the Medellín Conference, its impact on me cannot be overstated. I found my whole idea of spirituality and consequent pastoral approaches turned upside down as those documents became public. Challenges like the preferential option for the poor laid out by and for the Institutional Church helped me to see with new eyes what Jesus meant when he said that all of us will be judged exclusively on what we did or did not do for the "least of the brothers and sisters" (Matthew 25:40); or how complex the goal of non-violence becomes in the struggle against what the bishops called the "institutional violence" underlying Latin American realities.

The concept of social sin articulated at Medellín for the first time came into my field of vision. Above all, I came to understand the privileged place which the poor occupy in Salvation History.

The parish where I lived and worked covered an upper-middle-class area of Lima and the implementation of the Medellín vision struck many of the parishioners as revolutionary (which it was), radical (which it was), and tainted by what the people called "Marxist communism" (which it was not). This inevitable situation of conflict, too, became an invaluable learning experience for me. I found that the Gospel, translated into real life "political" terms can easily alienate people, especially those with most to lose from such Gospel mandates as "an option for the poor."

However, the Church gave us no choice but to act on the insights and challenges set forth at Medellín. There was no alternative. Indeed, the example of Jesus Himself inspired me in this regard. He also ran into severe opposition from the elites of his time – in fact it was His message of solidarity with the poor which ultimately made Him a threat to the status quo of 1st Century Palestine ("It is better for one man to die than for the nations to perish."(John 11:50)