

The liberationist understanding of the church contains flaws that may diminish the ability of base communities to witness against injustice. The author suggests an alternative.

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The Ecclesiologies of Medellín and the Lessons of the Base Communities

The documents produced at the meeting of the Latin American Catholic Bishops' Conference (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 are widely acclaimed as the founding constitution of liberation theology in this hemisphere.¹ While undoubtedly the documents are something new under the Latin American sun, they are something old as well. Medellín is a Janus, with elements looking backward as well as forward. Liberationist models of church and society are juxtaposed without resolution with organicist models borrowed from official Catholic social teaching since Pius XI. The resulting documents, therefore, reflect continuing tensions between factions of the Latin American church.

My purpose in this article will be twofold. First, I will illuminate the general thrust of Medellín's conflicting ecclesiologies by sketching the political background of the conference and examining the documents themselves. Second, I will show how the base-community movement contributed significantly to the strategies of both traditionalists and liberationists in the church; and I will argue for a theology of the base communities that supersedes both these ecclesiologies.

For the older approach, the base communities are merely the lowest level of the church's pyramid. Liberation theology, on the other hand, tends to read the small communities as does social science, i.e., in terms of their impact on the broader social body of the nation-state. My pur-

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pose is to address the need for a more *theological* reading of the politics of the base communities as alternative Christian bodies. In overcoming the traditionalist dualism which separates gospel perfection from the everyday lives of the laity, many base communities throughout Latin America stand in powerful witness against the oppressive structures of the world which does not know the good news of the new politics of the community gathered by Jesus Christ. Liberation theology has taught us to address the conflictual nature of Latin American reality. Christians need to read this conflict as between the world and this new community, the church.

New Christendom vs. Liberation Theology

Gustavo Gutiérrez in *A Theology of Liberation* traces the historical development of the church-world problem in the Latin American church in this century.² The "Christendom mentality" of the traditional church was succeeded in the 1930s and 1940s by the New Christendom approach of the lay apostolic movements. The principal embodiment of this approach was Catholic Action, whose members, sponsored and to some extent controlled by the Catholic hierarchy, undertook social and political activities as representatives of the church. By the 1950s and 1960s, however, Catholic Action had given way to the Christian Democratic parties and Catholic labor associations whose members, acting as individual Christians carrying their faith into the temporal sphere, took on the task of creating a society inspired by Christian principles.³ This arrangement maintained the traditional two-tiered ethic of gospel perfection for the clergy and worldly norms of justice for the laity.

The New Christendom approach incarnated in Catholic Action received its primary ideological nourishment from two sources: the thought of Jacques Maritain and official Catholic social teaching, especially Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno*.⁴ From Maritain came an acceptance of the modern separation of temporal and religious spheres, and the lay attempt to participate in modern political life with the intention of building a society based on Christian principles. From papal social teaching came an emphasis on re-Christianizing the social order based on a nonconflictual model of cooperation for the common good.

Quadragesimo Anno was written in 1931 in the depths of a profound crisis of capitalism. Pius XI did not, however, reject capitalism and advocate a thoroughgoing corporatist revolution, as some have supposed.⁵ Instead he put forward a somewhat vague plan for a moderate corporatism based on the intervention of a multitude of religious, professional,

and labor organizations between the individual and the state. Pius XI departs from the corporatists, however, in the encouragement of labor unions, both Catholic and nonconfessional.⁶ These unions are to be understood not in terms of class conflict — strikes and lockouts are expressly forbidden — but more along the lines of “vocational groups,” whose purpose is akin to that of the medieval guilds.⁷ Basic to Pius XI’s social reconstruction is the organization of the laity into cells of Catholic Action with the purpose of re-Christianizing the world. This was especially urgent among the working classes, both because of their miserable conditions and their alienation from the church. This work of evangelization and social reform would be undertaken by Christian workers themselves.⁸

Pius XI’s scheme is based on the idea that conflict among competing groups in society could be eliminated by bringing them together in one organization inspired by the social principles of the church. The Christian Democratic parties of Latin America that grew out of Catholic Action after World War II employed this idea in their “third way” between capitalism and socialism.⁹ The Christian Democrats believed that “class conflict is not the inherent law of social history but a pernicious error which prevents labor and capital from joining efforts to pursue the common good.”¹⁰ It was understood, however, that, since Latin American society was largely de-Christianized, the church could not impose its will on society, but must respect the boundaries between temporal and spiritual and work to imbue the society with Christian principles of justice and charity.

These lay movements helped to move sectors of the church toward more radical commitments, but ultimately veered from their “third way” between capitalism and socialism, becoming moderately conservative and reformist influences. Because they still viewed the world in terms of the church, liberation theologians objected that they did not completely respect the proper autonomy of the temporal sphere. They thus failed to see the political and necessarily conflictual nature of the world, and tended toward nostalgia for a more corporatist understanding of society.¹¹ The liberationist perspective, on the other hand, understands the workings of the “real world” and is able to turn its critique of oppressive structures toward the church itself; “the Church is seen in terms of the world.”¹² As Hugo Assmann put it in 1973:

The process of liberation as it is going on now implies the need for the Church to make a choice. In a general and basic sort of way, Vatican II taught the Church that it cannot find its *raison d’être* in itself. It has to

make definite acts of witness in relation to the process of liberation. In the light of its own sociological reality, the notion of its unity will tend to be conflictive.¹³

According to Gutiérrez, the "dualistic" and nonconflictual understanding of the church and world was superseded at Medellín.¹⁴ In fact, as we shall see, the New Christendom approach is very much present in the documents themselves, alongside the liberationist perspective. The point of these contradictions in the Medellín documents is not, as Enrique Dussel contends, that the "thought of that Conference stands somewhere in the transitional phase between 'developmentalism' and the 'theology of liberation,'" ¹⁵ as if the church were simply evolving toward the liberationist stance. Rather the bishops, in order to meet a profound crisis in the church and society, used widely different models juxtaposed without resolution in the final redaction of the documents. At the bottom of this tension were fundamentally different concepts of the church and its relationship to the world. The liberationists were becoming increasingly convinced that the world must be recognized as having its own proper autonomy; the institutional church began to perceive liberationism as a threat to the church itself.

The Medellín Documents*

It is against this background that we need to understand the ambiguities of the Medellín final documents. These ambiguities can be summed up in large part in the juxtaposition of the concepts of *development* and *liberation* in the documents. The 1960s were hailed as the "Decade of Development" for poor countries, with a massive influx of loans, aid, and advice from the wealthier nations. Toward the end of the decade, however, it had become clear that the beneficiaries of the rationalization of Latin American economies were the ruling elites and not the poor masses. *Developmentalism* (*desarrollismo*) took on a heavily pejorative sense among the most progressive elements of Latin American society, who scrapped the developmentalist model of reform of current structures in favor of the term *liberation* and its implication of downtrodden humanity's freedom to act as the agent of its own destiny.¹⁶

One source of ambiguity in the Medellín documents, then, is the existence of the terms *development* and *liberation* side by side in the final

*The Medellín documents are cited by an abbreviation of the title of the document, followed by the paragraph number. Abbreviations are as follows: P: Peace; PCE: Pastoral Concern for the Elites; J: Justice; E: Education; JPP: Joint Pastoral Planning; PCM: Pastoral Care of the Masses.

draft.¹⁷ Furthermore, as used there *development* has the goal of social transformation, but *developmentalists* are denigrated as generally elitist technocrats (PCE, 7, 11).¹⁸ We need to distinguish the three different terms roughly as follows: *Development* as a term "has synthesized the aspirations of the poor peoples during the last few decades," Gutiérrez wrote in 1971.¹⁹ This would include moderately progressive efforts at alleviating poverty such as those of the Christian Democrats. *Developmentalism*, primarily associated with First and Third World elites, refers to the enthusiastic embrace of technocratic capitalism as the way to reform in the 1960s; Brazil serves as a prime example. *Liberation* is the word chosen by the radical Latin American theologians of the late 1960s to convey a complete break with the status quo, access to power by the exploited classes, and the institution of a new type of socialist society. "Liberation in fact expresses the inescapable moment of radical change which is foreign to the ordinary use of the term *development*."²⁰

The difficulties involved in combining development and liberation terminology highlight the two conflicting models of restructuring Latin American society that are discernible in the Medellín documents. On the one hand, the bishops in the document entitled "Peace" provide a structural analysis of "neocolonialism," both internal and external to the poorer countries, which states, for example, that the rich nations profit from the poverty of the world's marginalized peoples by maintaining unfair terms of exchange for raw materials (P, 9a). In the face of this "institutionalized violence," the bishops consider the possibility of armed revolution as a last resort (P, 19) and favorably compare the revolutionaries, who "have a vivid sense of service for neighbor," with the developmentalists, who "place greater emphasis on economic progress than on the social betterment of the common people" (PCE, 7-8, 12).

On the other hand, we find in the document "Justice" a blueprint for progressive development based on an appeal to "businessmen, to their organizations and to the political authorities," that they might

make an effort to conduct their business according to the guidelines supplied by the social teaching of the Church. That the social and economic change in Latin America be channeled towards a truly human economy will depend fundamentally on this. (J, 10)

What is envisioned is a network of "intermediary structures" between the individual and the state which will facilitate participation by all sectors of society in the development process (J, 7, 11). Businesses are not to be identified with the owners of capital but are to be thought of as communities of persons. The extremes of both laissez-faire capitalism and

Marxism are to be avoided (J, 10), and the church is to lend its support to the "downtrodden of *every social class*" (J, 20, emphasis mine).

What we find in Medellín is not just "a confusing mixture of orthodox [liberal] and radical modes of analysis";²¹ what is understood as "development" contains as well a strong element of quasi-corporatist thought. A tempering of "*excessive* inequalities between poor and rich" (P, 23, emphasis mine) is to be accomplished by the integration of all into the running of businesses through intermediate structures (J, 11). Structures such as peasants' and workers' unions are to be thought of in terms of representation and participation in businesses (J, 12). "All of the sectors of society, but in this case, principally the social-economic sphere, should, because of justice and brotherhood, transcend antagonisms in order to become agents of national and continental development" (J, 13).

The Medellín documents, especially "Peace," are noted for their structural critique of capitalism, specifically the condemnation of the international terms of exchange for manufactured goods versus raw materials, the flight of capital from the peripheral countries to the center, tax evasion by multinationals, foreign debt, and the "international imperialism of money" (P, 9).²² This critique is not exclusively liberationist, however. As Mary Hobgood points out in *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, the type of corporatist thought found in the writings of Leo XIII and Pius XI predisposed the church both to a critique of the individualism of capitalism and acceptance of its hierarchical arrangements.²³ The type of development of capitalist structures envisioned by some elements of the Latin American episcopacy at Medellín seems based not on a liberationist model of class conflict but on a hierarchical configuration of all classes in an organic whole. This perspective exists side by side with a liberationist denunciation of "institutionalized violence" which can be "conquer[ed] by means of a dynamic action of awakening (*concientización*) and organization of the popular sectors" (P, 16, 18).

The document "Education" is deeply informed by the *concientización* method of Paulo Freire which rejects all paternalistic forms of education and the hierarchical arrangements they reflect. It opts for

"liberating education," that is, that which converts the student into the subject of his own development. Education is actually the key instrument for liberating the masses from all servitude and for causing them to ascend "from less human to more human conditions." (E, 8)

Concientización plays a key part in liberation theology's process of *secularization*, whereby humanity takes the reins of its own history.²⁴ On

the other hand, "Justice" identifies *concientización* with media campaigns directed at "key men" at the top of the social hierarchy (J, 17, 19). In addition the bishops claim, "To us, the Pastors of the Church, belongs the duty to educate the Christian conscience, to inspire, stimulate and help orient all of the initiatives that contribute to the formation of man" (P, 20). It is clear that in the hierarchical disposition of society favored by the less progressive element of the episcopacy gathered at Medellín, the church occupied a key position.

The Medellín documents, especially numbers 6–16, are primarily concerned with intraecclesial pastoral orientations for confronting the underdevelopment and injustice of the society. The impression is clearly given that the church is subject to reorientation but is not itself a source of injustice. Implicit in the radical analysis of social structures, however, is a critique of the church itself. Thus we get this criticism of the Medellín Working Document from José Comblin:

We must begin to recognize that the Church was complicit, to a great extent, with underdevelopment and, in a special way, with that form of underdevelopment which derives from the American past. *All action towards development must begin with a reform of the Church.*²⁵

What is at issue here goes to a fundamental difference between many of the bishops and the liberationists in construing the church-world axis. For the less progressive elements at Medellín, the church occupied the position of *mater et magistra* to the wider world; it was the "soul of society" (JPP, 9). Only by subjecting itself to the tutelage of the church could Latin American society become a harmonious and just whole. For the liberationists, on the other hand, true emancipation from injustice would come through *concientization* and *secularization*, which Gutiérrez equates with the progressive realization of each person's aspiration to be artisan of her or his own destiny.²⁶ This process entails realization of the proper autonomy of the world as sphere of human creativity, and the subsequent view of the church as part and parcel of the world. The church is therefore subject to structural critique.²⁷

For the liberationists, recognizing the givenness of the world means acknowledging its fundamentally political nature. The church, since it does not stand apart from the world, is obliged to take sides, as it always has done in fact through tacit approval of the status quo. Now it is being called to switch sides and make concrete political options in favor of the oppressed. Regarding the popular religiosity of the masses, the bishops, on the other hand, opt for an inclusive ecclesiology:

Given this type of religious sense among the masses, the Church is faced with the dilemma of either continuing to be a universal Church or, if it fails to attract and vitally incorporate such groups, of becoming a sect. Because she is a Church rather than a sect, she must offer her message of salvation to all men. . . . (PCM, 3)

Liberationist ecclesiology, in Ernst Troeltsch's terms, is "Calvinist"; it has a "sect-type" or perfectionist ethic, but has understood itself in the "real world" of economic processes and is concerned with the manipulation of these processes for religio-ethical ends.²⁸ This ecclesiology is juxtaposed in the Medellín documents with a "church-type" understanding, which employs a two-tiered ethic of religious and lay, and attempts to order society and the state by maintaining them under the tutelage of the church. Both of these widely differing understandings of church and world would do battle for the soul of the base community movement.

Base Communities

Base communities existed as scattered groups before Medellín, but most observers agree that the conference gave the definition and official impulse needed to constitute them as a movement.²⁹ Tens of thousands of base communities were formed all over Latin America in the years following Medellín. Although the base-community movement is most closely identified with liberation theology, at Medellín both conservatives and liberationists had a stake in the base communities and provided their own interpretation of their potential significance.

What Medellín has to say about base communities is worth quoting at length.

The Christian ought to find the living of the communion, to which he has been called, in his "base community," that is to say, in a community, local or environmental, which corresponds to the reality of a homogeneous group and whose size allows for personal fraternal contact among its members. Consequently, the Church's pastoral efforts must be oriented toward the transformation of these communities into a "family of God," beginning by making itself present among them as leaven by means of a nucleus, although it be small, which creates a community of faith, hope and charity. Thus the Christian base community is the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus, which on its own level must make itself responsible for the richness and expansion of the faith, as well as of the cult which is its expression. This community becomes then the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization, and it currently serves as the most important source of human advancement and development. The essential element for the existence of Christian base communities are their leaders or directors. These can be priests, deacons, men or women religious, or laymen. (JPP, 10-11)

It is clear that as "the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures," the base communities are thought of here in terms of the greater institutional church. Their part in the revitalization of parish life is to be coordinated on the grand scale by CELAM; at the local level the selection and formation of base-community leaders is a matter for "parish priests and bishops" (JPP, 11, 12). Base communities were construed by less progressive elements at Medellín as the first level of the church's pyramid.³⁰

Thomas Bruneau argues that the formation of the base-community movement was a deliberate strategy by the hierarchical church to regain the lower classes which had been lost to the church in the upheaval produced by urbanization.³¹ The waning of Catholic Action and other lay groups had created a need for groups to integrate the poor in the church's option for social transformation in Latin America. Though the reality of the Medellín conference is too complex to justify positing one deliberate strategy, Bruneau's thesis does suggest how the more moderate elements at Medellín could have integrated the base-community movement into an overall "church-type" ecclesiology.

In *The Papal Ideology of Social Reform*, Richard Camp argues that official Catholic social teaching from Leo XIII onward was developed in an attempt to recover working-class Catholics lost from the church in the age of industrialization.³² Not just a cynical ploy to boost membership, much of Catholic social teaching is based on the idea that the church is part of the solution to social ills. Liberation theologians, on the other hand, have become convinced that the church has been part of the problem. Liberationists have chosen, therefore, to view the church in terms of the world, as a potential political actor of great efficacy if it would take sides with the oppressed.

Against this backdrop liberation theologians have stressed the political role of the base communities. As organized groups of the oppressed, their process of *concientización* awakens them to their confrontation with the anti-evangelical forces of oppression. They reflect on the Bible in light of their real-life situation and act upon their faith; politics and faith are thus intertwined. Leonardo Boff in his influential book *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* states:

One need not be a Christian to be a good politician. The Scholastics of the Middle Ages knew this and taught it. But to be a good Christian, it is necessary to be concerned with social justice, and social justice is a political reality.³³

"Secular and political reality" has an "autonomous density" which must be attended to if the Kingdom, which is liberation, is to be achieved.³⁴ The church is that part of the world which has explicitly accepted the Kingdom.³⁵

As the church is part of the world, the social sciences have much to teach us about the nature of the church. Here, says Boff, sociology makes an important distinction between society and community. A society is a large impersonal organization marked by hierarchy, authority, and rules. A community, on the other hand, is characterized by reciprocity, equality, and the absence of alienating structures. Although no group is purely one type or another, Boff argues, as did Weber, that the supremacy of the communitarian over the societal is sustainable only in small groups. "Hence the importance of the basic church communities. They are communities within church society."³⁶ The larger institutional aspect of the church, according to Boff, arose out of the sociological need of any charismatic movement to sustain itself over time. The institution of the church, therefore, stands in necessary dialectic with, but is ever secondary to, its communitarian charism.³⁷

Liberation theology has the great virtue of not using this type of analysis to relegate the small "perfectionist" communities to political irrelevance, as "sects" which serve as a quixotic inspiration for the mainstream of the church. Instead, Boff sees the base communities as a call to the whole church to throw in its lot with the poor, to divest itself of ties to the oppressive classes and "more closely to approximate the utopian community ideal."³⁸ Conceived in this way, the practice of the laity in the base communities is a considerable advance over the two-tiered ethic of the older ecclesiology.

There are two main problems, however, with the way Boff (and I use him as a fair representative of liberation ecclesiology) construes what is happening in the base-community movement. The first problem lies in his view of authority as entirely negative, a necessary evil which qualifies the utopia of pure community. Boff likens the base communities "sprung from the people" to the original purity of the community of the apostles.³⁹ Authority, however, was present in the first Christian community in the person of Jesus, and after Jesus in the apostles; authority remains an intrinsic part of any truly Christian community.⁴⁰ The authority of the holy is that which teaches and reproduces the practices of virtue in a church community.⁴¹

W. E. Hewitt, author of a recent study of the Brazilian communities, points out that in spite of the liberationist idealization of base commu-

nities as "paragons of direct democracy," in fact they most often look to the guidance and governance of a single leader or the local priest or nun.⁴² Links to the institutional church (or "societal" church in Boff's terms) remain strong and are welcomed and needed by the local communities.⁴³ Boff assumes that authority of any kind restrains freedom rather than guiding it or even producing it: authority is a limit-situation to be surpassed in the liberation of the human person.

The second main problem with liberation ecclesiology of the base communities inheres in its conception of the political as the real. In an attempt to avoid the "ecclesiastical narcissism" (Gutiérrez's phrase) of the hierarchical church, the base church is defined as "An Oppressed People Organizing for Liberation."⁴⁴ So conceived, the church becomes an interest group which assumes its norms from the political arena and only its abstract motivation from its faith. In this sense liberation theology ironically approximates a Niebuhrian realism, in which the gospel ethic of perfection does not provide concrete norms for the political realm but rather a "spirituality" for the frustrating tasks of the pragmatist engaged in worldly politics.⁴⁵

"Faith," says Boff, "is the horizon against which all things are globalized — without denying secular or political reality their autonomous density."⁴⁶ Therefore, "faith generates commitment to the transformation of society,"⁴⁷ but faith belongs to the realm of the ideal which must then be applied to the real processes of the socio-political realm. Since reality must be known before faith is applied to it, a separate tool, social science, is needed to uncover the laws of history.⁴⁸ What this account fails to see is that faith is constituted in a complex set of practices and ways of seeing which are learned in the community of the followers of Jesus. The Christian brings the eyes of faith to the reading of "reality"; she reads the world not as autonomous but as already enfolded in the Christian narrative of the promises of God through Jesus Christ. Faith is not an interior attitude but is itself a politics, a way of embodying the very particular story of Jesus Christ that is learned in the practices of the Christian community. For Boff, on the other hand, Christology "does not offer any concrete definitions of goals because it is not guided by an analysis of the situation or a consideration of viable pathways to liberation. Its praxis is basically pragmatic."⁴⁹

I want to claim that this model fails the base communities not only normatively but in some contexts descriptively as well. Political scientist Scott Mainwaring in "Grass-roots Catholic Groups and Politics in Brazil" labels the views of many basic-church communities "sectarian" and

laments the resulting loss of political effectiveness.⁵⁰ According to Mainwaring the basic community movement in the Catholic Church from its origins and into the 1980s rejected the state as an arena of political action.⁵¹ Pastoral agents and activists from the base communities regarded the development of democratic institutions in Brazil with indifference, subjecting the current government to the same type of critique that they applied to the military government and, indeed, all government. Mainwaring links this indifference regarding democratic institutions to the lack of appreciation for a plurality of conflicting interests in society. A "common good" is still sought at this level of the church, a remnant of the traditional ultramontanist rejection of liberalism and suppression of viewpoints which oppose this good.⁵² This type of opposition to the world is sustained within the base communities by an intra-ecclesial ethic which Mainwaring describes thus:

There is often a strong sense of righteousness within the community and among pastoral agents, not unlike the righteousness found among conservative religious groups, that leads to the attitude that the group's political views are the ones Jesus inspired, while other political positions fall short of Jesus's teachings or are sinful. Within this world view compromise can become unacceptable on moral grounds. The wisdom of the old adage "Politics is the art of the possible" is lost.⁵³

If this is an accurate description of the practice of at least one significant portion of the base-community movement, then I would like to suggest that the base communities are indeed a faithful and dynamic way of being the church, but in a way that escapes both of the ecclesiologies engaged at Medellín. Rather than accept Mainwaring's label "sectarian," we need to interpret the refusal to participate in "the art of the possible" as the forging of an ecclesial kind of politics which denies the status of the "real" to secular politics. In other words, ecclesial politics will not allow secular politics to define what is possible. Social justice, as Boff says, is indeed political, but it is realizable only in making the church itself, with its "perfectionist" adherence to the gospel precepts of justice and charity, into a politics. The church is a political alternative to the world when the members of a base community share their food, visit the sick, build a well, or defy government tanks to demand an end to torture. These activities are sectarian only if "politics" means assuming the illusion that the Christian hope of Latin America's dispossessed millions lies either in the transition to bourgeois democracy or in the workers' assumption of state power.

W. E. Hewitt's recent study of base communities in Brazil fills a

gap in the academic literature by providing a detailed empirical account of what base communities in Brazil actually do. What he finds are close-knit communities engaged in "traditional" activities such as charity work and Bible study, as well as more "innovative" activities such as informal liturgies (*celebrações*), reflection and discussion, and consciousness-raising. Communities collect and distribute clothes and food, share child care, visit the sick and elderly, engage in joint work projects (*mutirões*), and operate food cooperatives.⁵⁴ The most "political" activities in secular terms undertaken with any regularity, according to Hewitt's study, are community-action projects (*revindicações*), which consist of petitioning government authorities for basic neighborhood services. Some communities engage in occasional protest movements or support of striking workers.⁵⁵ At the same time, Hewitt agrees with Mainwaring and others in finding a deep suspicion of party politics among base community members and a refusal to partake of politics as defined by the world.⁵⁶

If this is the case, asks Hewitt, how will the base communities "implement their mandate for social change?"⁵⁷ Hewitt's answer, similar to that of Mainwaring, is to see the base communities, in Weberian fashion, as "carrier groups" of a new type of ethic to the wider society. They are developing "that spirit of 'enlightened self-interest' that Alexis de Tocqueville attributed to those proud and simple folk who laid the groundwork for America's political culture in the early nineteenth century."⁵⁸ Now, not only is this answer a violation of the theological significance of these communities, but the very way the question is put guarantees that the base communities will be seen in terms of their impact on "society," disregarding their own integrity as *alternative societies*, constituents of the "society of friends" that the church is called to be.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, Hewitt's question is the same one being asked by liberationists such as Boff who construe the church as one interest group within the wider, autonomous society. They are, consequently, unable to envision these communities as enactments of the politics of Jesus. There is a profound need to see the base communities as an answer to a more explicitly theological question: what form is the body of Christ to take in witness to a suffering and sinful world?

The experience of the Honduran community of El Limón serves as one example of the inadequacy of existing ecclesiologies. The community was born in the educational efforts of the local priest and the self-organization of the community following his departure in the late 1970s. In 1982 members of the community were jailed in an effort to squelch

their legal petition for the use of unoccupied land. Eventually permission was granted, and the community has continued to farm the land cooperatively, with the community's beasts of burden available for use by all. Members of the community, who both work and worship together, describe their actions in terms of the creation account of Genesis; the land was created for the use of God's people together. Led by a Delegate of the Word, their reflections at Sunday liturgy center on the this-worldly sharing of the crucified Christ in their struggles to live.

Clearly the formation of this type of economy for the community is a highly subversive political act. The efforts of El Limón stand in the way of the Honduran government's Agricultural Modernization Act of 1992, the so-called Norton Law, named after the AID employee who drew it up. Under the new law, all permission previously granted to work land may be revoked at the wish of the landowner. The idea is to concentrate land in larger, more "efficient" tracts in order to produce export crops to service the national debt. In conflict with these macro-economic forces of global capital stand base communities such as that of El Limón, which understand themselves as participants in the alternative political-economy known as the Kingdom of God. As one of the leaders of the community summed it up simply, "To be a true Christian and share in the reign of God, we need to share with the people who don't have."⁶⁰ This is a far cry from "enlightened self-interest."

Of course, some in the base-community movement, for example in Nicaragua, do conceive of their position in terms of secular politics. Others locate lay participation in base communities in terms of the dualistic ethic of the church-type. I am arguing that the base communities given impetus at Medellín should be understood in a way which goes beyond the ecclesiologies juxtaposed there. The older models of the church, still very much present in Latin America,⁶¹ have the virtue of recognizing the importance of the church at some critical distance from the world. The world is viewed in terms of the church, as if the church has something distinctive to say that the world needs to hear. Its failings stem from a nonconflictual, hierarchical view of society and the church that identifies too closely with Latin America's elites and reserves the radical perfection of the gospel ethic to clerical vows alone.

Liberation theology, on the other hand, overcomes the older model's refusal to recognize the reality of conflict. This conflict should not, however, serve as a corollary to a kind of political realism which views conflict as inherent in all human society. Conflict comes, rather, between the church and the world, as the church recognizes that it will suf-

fer for taking Jesus' teachings seriously enough to create the kinds of community that the gospel calls the church to be.

The principal danger of liberationist ecclesiology, as I see it, is that in blurring the lines between church and world, it will diminish the ability of the base communities to stand in witness against the injustice of the world. To see the world clearly for what it is, Christians must create communities that are not-world, communities where the gospel story is enacted without regard to political expediency. As the testimony of many persecuted members of base communities can affirm, however, the very process of forming such communities is a highly subversive, and therefore political, act.⁶²

Notes

1. Examples are so common I will cite only a few here. Hugo Assmann in *Practical Theology of Liberation*, trans. Paul Burns (London: Search Press, 1975) says, "A theology of liberation began to take shape only after the Medellín conference" (38), and credits Medellín with the replacement of the term "development" with that of "liberation" (45-46). Leonardo Boff in his *EcclesioGenesis*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), attributes the major impulse of the base community movement, the crucible of liberation theology, to Medellín (4). José Camps, in the prologue of *Iglesia y liberación humana* (Barcelona: Editorial Nova Terra, 1969), comments that both bishops and the most radical elements of the liberation movement are taking their starting point from Medellín. Phillip Berryman says that the Medellín documents are considered the "Magna Carta" of liberation theology; Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (Oak Park, Ill.: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987), 22-24.

2. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 29-46.

3. *Ibid.*, 35-36; and Edward L. Cleary, O.P., *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 3-6.

4. Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, trans. Alan Neely (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 107-8.

5. Richard L. Camp, *The Papal Ideology of Social Reform: A Study in Historical Development 1878-1967* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 39-40. See *Quadragesimo Anno*, paragraph 101: "Leo XIII's whole endeavor was to adjust this economic regime [capitalism] to the standards of true order; whence it follows that the system itself is not to be condemned." By "corporatism" I understand the hierarchical organization of the state based on the activity of organic economic and social groups, or "corporations." The corporatism of Pius XI differed from that of the Fascists in that the corporations in the pope's scheme would not operate under the direct control of the state.

6. Camp, 125-27.

7. *Quadragesimo Anno*, para. 81-87, 94.

8. Camp, 124-25. See also Pope Pius XI, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno (On Catholic Action)* in *Papal Thought on the State* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1958).

9. See for example Brian Loveman, *Chile: The Legacy of Hispanic Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 304-6. Loveman credits both *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadra-*

gesimo Anno with providing the ideological underpinnings for the Chilean Christian Democratic party See also Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, 322–23

10 Dennis Goulet, "Economic Systems, Middle Way Theories, and Third World Realities" in Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, SJ, eds, *Readings in Moral Theology No 5 Official Catholic Social Teaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 346 Michael Novak may well be correct descriptively in stating that Latin American economies exhibit many "pre-capitalist" elements based not on free competition but on paternalistic forms of planning liberation theologians are therefore off base in making simple denunciations of capitalism in Latin American society We need not follow Novak to his conclusion that Latin America needs more capitalism, not less, Michael Novak, *Will It Liberate? Questions about Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 127–42

11 Gutiérrez, 29–31, 36 Gutiérrez traces the progressive secularization of society as the process of the liberation of human reason for the purpose of human self-realization The political sphere is understood broadly as "the collective arena for human fulfillment Only within this broad meaning of the political sphere can we situate the more precise notion of 'politics,' as an orientation to power For Max Weber this orientation constitutes the typical characteristics of political activity The concrete forms taken on by this quest for and exercise of political power are varied But they are all based on the profound aspiration of a humankind that wants to take hold of the reins of its own life and be the artisan of its own destiny" (30)

12 Ibid, 42

13 Assmann, 70

14 Gutiérrez, 41

15 Enrique Dussel, *Caminos de liberación latinoamericana* (Buenos Aires: Latinoamérica Libros, 1973), 110 Elsewhere Dussel writes "Medellin was of imponderable importance for Latin America It was not only the moment of the 'application' of the Second Vatican Council but also of the discovery of the real Latin America and the transition to a clear commitment to liberation," Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, 143

16 Ibid, 16–25

17 The term *liberation* appears nine times in the index to the final documents Roberto Oliveros in *Liberación y teología Genesis y crecimiento de una reflexión 1966–1977* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1977), 104–10, 127, says that, while Medellín continued to mix the terms *development* and *liberation*, significant sectors of the progressive wing of the church, as represented at the Chimbote conference of July 1968, had already rejected the term *development* for that of *liberation*

18 In the English translation *desarrollistas* is rendered "Advocates of Development" (para 7) or "advocates of economic development" (para 11)

19 Gutiérrez, 16

20 Ibid, 17

21 Mary E. Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 156 Hobgood makes the helpful distinction of organic, orthodox, and radical economic theories in Catholic social doctrine

22 The "international imperialism of money," quoted in the document on Peace from *Populorum Progressio*, had in turn quoted it from Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno*, written in 1931

23 Hobgood, 96–98 Hobgood argues that the popes' structural analysis led to a critique of capitalism, but their need to protect the church from the threat of socialism led to an acceptance of a moderated capitalism, cf 106–123

24. Gutiérrez, 57, 29–33. See also Dennis McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), 164–75.

25. José Comblin, quoted in Hans-Jürgen Prien, *La Historia del Cristianismo en América Latina* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1985), 868, my translation, italics in original.

26. Gutiérrez, 29–33.

27. *Ibid.*, 41–43.

28. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960); cf. 82–89. Troeltsch regards the State and Society as ontologically privileged by virtue of their basis in the “real” phenomenal world of economic life; the churches are free associations of private citizens who claim a noumenal or “vertical” reference to the transcendent.

29. See Prien, 1073, 1077; Camps, 31–32; Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, 4.

30. Scott Mainwaring notes that the Brazilian bishops, in their original use of the term “base communities” in 1965, construed them as “the lowest level expression of the Church,” under strong clerical control and without political impact; “Grass-roots Catholic Groups and Politics in Brazil” in Scott Mainwaring and Alexander Wilde, eds., *The Progressive Church in Latin America* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 160.

31. Thomas C. Bruneau, “Basic Christian Communities in Latin America: Their Nature and Significance (especially in Brazil),” in Daniel Levine, ed., *Churches and Politics in Latin America* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1981), 225–37.

32. Camp, 1–4.

33. Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, 38.

34. *Ibid.*, 41.

35. Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 1–2.

36. Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, 5.

37. *Ibid.*, 3–9.

38. *Ibid.*, 9.

39. *Ibid.*, 7.

40. Marcello deC. Azevedo, S.J. recognizes this in his *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1987), 202–04.

41. Here I use the term “virtue” in Thomas Aquinas’s sense of a good habit by which we live rightly; see the *Summa Theologiae*, I–II.55.4. On the role of authority in learning the Christian virtues, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 60–68.

42. W. E. Hewitt, *Basic Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 52–53.

43. Mainwaring, 155–56.

44. Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, 40.

45. See for example Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

46. *Ibid.*, 41.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Leonardo Boff’s brother Clodovis stresses this point in his *Theology and Praxis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987): “Confronting the scientific process, theologians must wait, in an attitude of attention. They have nothing pertinent to say until they are correctly instructed as to what is transpiring “out there,” at a distance from them” (52).

49 Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator A Critical Christology for Our Time*, trans Patrick Hughes (London SPCK, 1980), 271

50 Manwaring, 176-78

51 Ibid, 169-71

52 Ibid, 181

53 Ibid, 177

54 Hewitt, 42-50

55 Ibid, 43-44

56 Ibid, 49, 60

57 Ibid, 109

58 Ibid, 86

59 See John Milbank's discussion of liberation theology and social science in his *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1990), 240-49

60 Conversation with Mártir, community leader of El Limón, March 16, 1992

61 See, for example, Boff, *Church Charism and Power*, 2-7

62 I would like to thank Frederick Bauerschmidt for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this article

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