Pope Francis Puts Latin America on the Ecclesial Map

by Sheila Curran, R.S.M.

From the very beginning, Pope Francis was different.

He began his address in such a normal way, greeting the crowd at St. Peter’s Square with a simple “Good afternoon.” Before addressing the crowd, he requested that they pray for him. With heads bowed, all who had gathered in the Piazza of St. Peter prayed in silence. Since then, Francis has won the hearts of many Catholics, observers from all religious affiliations, and non-believers. His evident simplicity and humility made an immediate impact around the world. People were quick to note that things were different. This new man brought to mind the much loved John XXIII. This election, more than most of the previous ones, sent a wave of hope through all sectors of the church.

In this article I would like to look briefly at Pope Francis’ impact on the Latin American Church. The Latin American Church in particular is buzzing with hope at the moment. It would be simplistic to state that this is so simply because a Latino is Pope for the first time in history. We have to look more closely at the recent history of the church in Latin America to understand why hope is buoyant just now in the Christian communities there. People there feel so delighted simply because the new man understands what they are all about. After all, Cardinal Bergoglio was the head of the redaction committee that produced the final document from the fifth general assembly of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops Conference (CELAM) in Aparecida in 2007.

Pope Francis and a Preferential Option for the Poor

Pope Francis, from the very outset, talked about the “Church of the poor and for the poor.” This reflects his experience in the Latin American Church, which, in its response to Vatican II, identified itself with the poor. The Latin American Bishops in Medellín (1968) made the “preferential option for the poor” a theme that runs through all subsequent CELAM conferences.¹ The preferential option for the poor is central to the Gospel, and it is out of this option that the church denounces poverty, injustice, inequality, and institutionalized violence, all of which are prevalent in Latin America. Pope Francis began his papacy by choosing to live simply in a less spacious apartment in the papal guesthouse rather than in the Vatican palace. When the conclave finished, he collected his suitcase


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and paid his own bills at the hotel where he had been staying. He has denounced the culture of waste and comfort in which we live.

In his visit to Lampedusa, a symbol of the many unrecognized places in our world, Pope Francis said, “We have fallen into a globalization of indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others. It doesn’t affect us. It doesn’t interest us. It’s not our business.” This is something that resonates with many people in Latin America. In his address to the Latin American Bishops in Rio de Janeiro, he reminded them once again that an option for the poor is God’s option:

God becomes visible precisely through us, through the poor, because it is in the poor that God always acts. The Church cannot distance itself from simplicity. Without the guarantee of simplicity, the church is seen as deprived of the necessary conditions in order to “fish” for God in the deep waters of the divine mystery.

The Latin America people know that a preferential option for the poor is not something abstract. They understand that, when using the term “poor,” one size does not fit all; the faces of the poor are diverse. Poverty is a complex issue. It is unjust and inhuman and not from God. A church that identifies with the poor and joins in their struggle for justice has to be prepared to suffer. Bishops, priests, sisters, and thousands of committed Christians throughout Latin America have given their lives as they lived out their commitment to the Gospel. This church, through its solidarity with the poor, gives hope by believing in a God of Life. By “unblocking” the cause for the beatification and canonization of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated as he celebrated Mass in March, 1980, Pope Francis has given hope to many Latin Americans, especially the families of those whose loved ones lost their lives or been “disappeared” as a result of struggling to manifest God’s reign of justice and peace.

Pope Francis has also acknowledged that at times the church has distanced itself and has not adequately responded to the complexity that is involved in interpreting the “signs of the times” (Mt 16:3) as it has ministered to those who are on the margins.

Maybe the church has presented itself in a very weak manner, far too removed from the needs of those who have abandoned it, much too weak in responding to their questioning, much too cold in dealing with them, far too self-absorbed, a prisoner of its own rigid expression; maybe the world has converted the church into a relic of the past, unable to deal with new issues; maybe the Church was only able to provide answers in the infancy stages of life, but not in the adult stages.

This is a challenge to all of us as Church. It requires that we check our prejudices and assumptions. It is a call to solidarity with those on the margins. It is a call to listen to all as equal, to be open to people, and to receive and embrace them all warmly.

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3 CELAM, Encuentro con el Comité De Coordinación Del CELAM, Discurso del Santo Padre Francisco, July 28, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-celam-rio_sp.html. "Dios quiere manifestarse precisamente a través de nuestros medios, medios pobres, porque siempre es él el quien actúa. -La Iglesia no puede alejarse de la sencillez. Sin la garantía de la simplicidad la Iglesia se ve privada de las condiciones que hacen posible “pescar” a Dios en las aguas profundas de su misterio.” (English translations are the author’s.)
5 CELAM, Encuentro con el Comité. “Tal vez la Iglesia se ha mostrado demasiado débil, demasiado lejana de las necesidades de los que han abandonado, demasiado pobre para responder a sus inquietudes, demasiado fría para con ellos, demasiado autorreferencial, prisionera de su propio lenguaje rígido; tal vez el mundo parece haber convertido a la Iglesia en una reliquia del pasado, insuficiente para las nuevas cuestiones; quizás la Iglesia tenía repuesta para la infancia del hombre, pero no para su edad adulta.”
Renovation of Structures

We now know that the Pope chose the name of Francis not only for the simplicity of the lifestyle of the saint but also because St. Francis was called to reform a Church in ruins. Pope Francis has taken a significant step towards collegiality by forming an advisory group of eight Cardinals that represent the five continents to help him reform the curia, the Vatican Bank, and, one hopes, the Church as a whole. Given that the Church is the people of God, it is hoped that this is an opportunity for all people to put forward their issues to their representatives.

In his presentation to the CELAM, Pope Francis highlighted the need for bishops and priests to be close to the people. This closeness creates communion and a sense of belonging, a meeting place. This closeness takes the form of dialogue and creates a culture of encounter. If this truly happens, the bishops and priests will then be able to witness to, and learn from, the diversity that exists within the global church.

In his flight back from World Youth Day, Pope Francis surprised the world by saying that if gay persons “accept the Lord and have goodwill, who am I to judge them?” This is in stark contrast to the remarks of his predecessors and indicates a small shift from the position held previously by the church leaders.

On a less positive note, Pope Francis made an unclear statement about the need for a theology of womanhood in the church. More than half the members of the church are women. In Latin America, women have been leaders of Basic Christian Communities for many years. He appears, so far, not to recognize the struggle of women and the theology that women have been producing for decades now. To date, Pope Francis has avoided the issues of sexual ethics and morality. Perhaps he felt that if he addressed these issues at World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro (July 2013), he would have lost many young people. These are painful and complex issues that still need to be addressed.

Conclusion

Six months after his election, it is uncertain whether Pope Francis’ words will result in concrete transformations within our Church. We are the Church. We need to take advantage of this new moment. We cannot be mere spectators. If we all respond to Pope Francis’ call to be a church of the poor, to be in solidarity with those on the margins, and to become creators of hope, then true transformation of the church and the world can happen.

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6 CELAM, Encuentro con el Comité. “La cercanía crea comunión y pertenencia, da lugar al encuentro. La cercanía toma forma de diálogo y crea una cultura del encuentro.”