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FROM COLLEGIALITY TO SYNODALITY IN LATIN AMERICA

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Abstract

The creation of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) represented a unique reception of the Second Vatican Council, positioning the Latin American Church as a Source Church for today's process of reforms. The General Conferences, hosted by CELAM, such as Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992), and Aparecida (2007), cannot be reduced to mere texts. In the specific case of Medellín (1968), presented in this paper, the way in which this Conference proceeded gave rise to a spirit of convergence among bishops, priests, religious, and laypeople that took shape in the *working method*. This inaugurated a unique ecclesiality inspired by a collegial practice and completed by a Synodal Spirit that advanced the ecclesial model of People of God of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America. In this paper, we will present the key elements to understand how Medellín gave shape to a synodal style and practice, more environmental than thematized, that led to a new way of being Church in Latin America.

Keywords: CELAM; Church in Latin America; Collegiality; Ecclesiology; Medellín; Synodality; Vatican II

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Introduction

On 23 November 1965, pope Paul VI encouraged the bishops to draw up a continental pastoral plan¹ that would express CELAM's prompt reception of the Council and articulate a proper identity for the church in Latin America.² A little over two years later, on 20 January 1968, Paul VI announced the convening of the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops and, on 24 August 1968, he inaugurated the event with a speech delivered at the cathedral of Bogotá. The working sessions of the Conference took place at the seminary in Medellín between 26 August and 6 September 1968.³

Taking as its theme "The Church's Role in the Transformation of Latin America in Light of the Council," the Medellín Conference produced sixteen documents that revealed a new awareness that "the social situation demands an efficacious presence of the Church that goes beyond the promotion of personal holiness by preaching and the sacraments."⁴ Medellín meant passing from a reflecting church to an adult church, which had now become a "source" church,⁵ broadening and completing Collegiality in a *Synodal way of proceeding*.

Broadening and Completing Collegiality

When Vatican II began, the Latin American church already had a collegial structure. The creation of CELAM in 1955 had resulted in a distinctive working relationship that encouraged a permanent flow of information among the local churches of Latin America and the Caribbean, which were represented by their respective bishops' conferences. CELAM's organizational and consultative character, defined in its first statutes as an "organ for contact and collaboration," allowed for the emergence of an authentically regional approach that broadened and completed a collegial way of proceeding.

With the emergence of this collaborative working method in the church, local clergy gained a greater awareness of their own theological and ecclesial contribution to the church's life. While it is

¹See Paul VI, "Address on the Tenth Anniversary of CELAM," 23 November 1965, at www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches.

²M. McGrath, "Algunas reflexiones sobre el impacto y la influencia permanente de Medellín y Puebla en la Iglesia de América Latina," *Revista Medellín*, 58-59 (1989) 152-179.

³See Cf. R. Luciani, "Medellín Fifty Years Later: From Development to Liberation," *Theological Studies* 79 (2018) 566-589.

⁴J. Mejía, "El pequeño Concilio de Medellín," *Criterio* 41 (1968) 688.

⁵See H.C. de Lima Vaz, "Igreja-reflexo vs. Igreja-fonte," *Cadernos Brasileiros* 46 (1968) 17-22.

true that the concept of collegiality was thematized during the Second Vatican Council, it was already being practiced among the Latin American bishops, who “effectively affirmed their bonds of union and their shared consciousness.”⁶ Cecilio de Lora notes:

Ten years before the Second Vatican Council promulgated the doctrine of episcopal collegiality (LG 22), the Latin American Church was practicing it, not with words but with works and in truth: it was something truly prophetic that would later serve as a model for other churches through the universal Church.⁷

The unity between doctrine and pastoral sensibility that had been achieved in Latin America long before the Council allowed for an experience of collegiality that was different from its traditional, juridical form. Since the bishops were truly representing a *portio Populi Dei* and exercising their ministry of pastoral service to the people while situated in this world, their awareness of belonging to a college of bishops could not be understood apart from a real and obligatory relation to the people and their historical circumstances. As noted at the Medellín Conference, a particular part of the people is called to constitute “a particular Church, in which the Church of Christ—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—is truly found and truly operates” (“Pastoral de conjunto,” 17).⁸ This is a *situated* collegiality, which gets lost when collegiality is understood as deriving from episcopal ordination *per se*, and when it is thought that bishops can exist without representing a *portio Populi Dei*, that is, as functionaries who do not exercise ministry and so produce doctrine without pastoral sensibility. As the Medellín documents make clear, episcopal communion does not exist for the self-preservation of the *communio hierarchica*. This is why Landazuri Ricketts insisted that “the deepening of our collegiality allows us to discern the meaning of our pastoral action in a Latin American context; it determines our action.”⁹ He also warned: “But there is something more: the presence of the poor should condition and govern our joint pastoral plans.”¹⁰ There is thus a progressive broadening of collegiality that comes from the lived experience of a pastoral approach that makes an unambiguous option for the poor and is based on a People of God ecclesiology.

⁶A. Methol Ferré, “Del Vaticano II a Medellín,” at www.metholferre.com. (accessed 21 January 2018).

⁷C. De Lora, “Del Concilio a Medellín, hoy,” *Horizonte* 9, 24 (2011) 1234.

⁸https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf

⁹J. Landazuri Ricketts, “Discurso de clausura,” “Discurso de clausura de la II Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano” en *Signos de renovación. Recopilación de documentos post-conciliares de la Iglesia en América Latina*, Lima: Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social, 1969, 250–51.

¹⁰Ricketts, “Discurso de clausura,” 252.

Jorge Mejía summed up what happened in Medellín when he stated that “there was above all an experience of episcopal collegiality, nourished and completed by the experience of the communion of each and every person, which is the Church.”¹¹ It is interesting to observe that he insisted that it is this communion of each and every person that bestows a note of completeness to episcopal collegiality. It is thus possible to speak of the contextual practice of co-responsibility on the part of all church members for the common good of the People of God as a consequence of the pastoral nature of collegial activity. The spirit of co-responsibility should be founded on the common baptismal identity of all the faithful, by which all are responsible for ecclesial communion and mission. This identity is to be experienced in the ecclesial community—not individually or privately—and it is to be experienced horizontally by all those who live the life of the People of God. Therefore, this “spirit” should be “institutionalized.” Accordingly, we read in the Medellín documents:

The lay community, by reason of its common priesthood, enjoys the right and has the duty to collaborate in making an indispensable contribution to pastoral action. It is therefore the duty of the priests to dialogue with them not just occasionally but constantly and in an established manner” (“Sacerdotes,” 16).¹²

The Latin American adoption and exercise of co-responsibility made manifest the unity and communion existing among all the local churches of the continent. At the same time, it affiliated them to the universal church while preserving their proper regional or continental identity. It was a true *communio ecclesiarum*. This will give us some idea of what José Oscar Beozzo meant when he spoke of the exercise of broadened collegiality at Medellín. The novelty of this phenomenon, in his judgment, was visible mainly in *the assembly's working method*, which was not repeated in the same way at any other episcopal conference. The participants at Medellín were able to move beyond a narrow vision of collegiality, which would have reduced the conference to being merely a consultative body for the Roman Pontiff.¹³ They put into practice “a broadened notion of collegiality, one that bestows responsibility for the life and mission of the Church on the totality of the People of God.”¹⁴

¹¹Mejía, “El pequeño Concilio,” 687.

¹²https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf

¹³See J.O. Beozzo, “Medellín: Inspiração e raízes,” *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 232 (1998) 832.

¹⁴Beozzo, “Medellín,” 833.

The Emergence of a Practice and a Style

CELAM had fostered the contextual practice that moved the bishops toward a shared identity. Before the Medellín Conference, CELAM had held eleven ordinary meetings, one each year. It had twelve departments that provided consulting and formation services to the church on the continent and, in different cities, it had four institutes dedicated to research. Moreover, between 1966 and 1968, it had convened six specialized meetings for planning the doctrinal orientation of the Medellín Conference.

While journeying on this road to Medellín, the bishops experienced true ecclesiality and developed an ecclesial style that involved working together in groups and adopting collegial forms of action.

By using these methods people came together to communicate their experiences and to analyze their concerns; in this way new life was generated, and they began to see the big picture. One has to remember the isolation that had previously prevailed and the lack of opportunities for meeting together.¹⁵

This ecclesial style was unprecedented, because never before had there been sociocultural and ecclesial interaction of such magnitude. It was also different from traditional collegial practice, where every form of exchange in the church was determined primarily by juridical logic and an ontological metaphysics. A decisive step was thus taken from an ecclesiastical style that was monocultural, juridical, and Roman to one that was multicultural, charismatic, and regional. The shift necessitated a search for ways in which to integrate local differences and create a greater unity in fidelity to the conciliar spirit.

The Council had developed the theme of collegiality (LG, 22-23) but not that of synodality, which was often identified with the collegial activity of the bishops in conciliar meetings. Understood thus, synodality lost its broader meaning and its application to the different levels in which it could be exercised by the People of God: among bishops (*affectus collegialis*), between bishops and priests (*communio sacramentalis* in the ministerial priesthood), and in relation to laypeople (co-responsibility). A significant difficulty – and one that still persists – was a certain tendency to hinder the broadening of synodality to include consultation with all the faithful and not to limit it to the two traditional, institutional forms, councils and synods.¹⁶

¹⁵J. Álvarez Calderón, "En ruta hacia Medellín," *Páginas* 58 (1983) 19.

¹⁶See W. Aymans, "Sinodalità: forma di governo ordinaria o straordinaria nella Chiesa," in W. Aymans, R. Bertolino, and G. Mangels, ed., *Diritto canonico e*

The word “synodality” denotes an *affectus*, an experience, a spirit, a form of interaction among persons. A synod is an extraordinary event that gives concrete shape to this form of interaction but does not exhaust it. We should not confuse synodality with synods. We cannot treat synodality simply as a concept derived from collegiality or conciliarity. Synodality is a mode of being and acting that affects the *church’s ways of life, its instruments of discernment, and its structures of government*. It is a constitutive dimension of ecclesiality, not just a defined act or a functional method. It presupposes the principle of communion,¹⁷ which bestows identity on the church because it does not consider the different ministries only “with regard their sacramental and jurisdictional functions; rather it refers to the whole mystical-sacramental reality of the Church, which at the ontological level is a *communio cum Deo et hominibus*, and at the structural level a *communio ecclesiarum*.”¹⁸

At Medellín, the living out of ecclesial communion in fraternal and filial solidarity was accompanied by a mode of interacting in which it was neither juridical authority nor majority vote that guaranteed concurrence with respect to judgments made and decisions taken, but rather “a phenomenon of the bishops’ convergence among themselves.”¹⁹ This is what Landazuri Ricketts called the “convergence of prophetic circumstances,”²⁰ a convergence that gave rise to positive personal and sociocultural attitudes and actions, such as listening and consulting rather than just cold analysis of historical conditions. The process of listening and consulting gave direction and meaning to the decisions taken by the bishops at Medellín. Those decisions were based on concern for the common good of the people and designed to shape pastoral practice in accord with the historical reality of the poor.

The Council had not produced a clear expression or a juridical articulation of spiritual convergence such as would unite the

comunioni ecclesiale. Saggi di diritto canonico in prospettiva teologica, Turin: Giappichelli Editore, 1993, 40.

¹⁷See G. Routhier, *Le défi de la communion. Une relecture de Vatican II*, Montreal: Médiaspaul, 1994.

¹⁸E. Corecco, “Sinodalità,” in *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia*, G. Barbaglio and S. Dianich, ed., Rome, Edizione Paoline, 1979, 1484.

¹⁹“Synodality is a jurisdictional modality by which the unity of the bishops is guaranteed within the *communio ecclesiarum* at the level of authoritative interpretation of the Word”; “the juridically binding force of its collegial judgments and decisions is not the fruit of the formal force of the principle of majority but rather is a phenomenon of the bishops’ convergence among themselves.” Corecco, “Sinodalità,” 1487.

²⁰Ricketts, “Discurso de clausura,” 248.

prophetic charism and the *sensus fidei* of the People of God together with the discernment of the college of bishops and the action of the Roman Pontiff. The immediate post-conciliar hermeneutic used the concept of co-responsibility to refer to the participatory relations that should exist among all members of the church. However, this concept corresponds to a vertical relationship established between laypeople and bishops, one derived from the *communio hierarchica*. It is a concept that can help to structure ecclesial life on the basis of *communio*, but it fails to define the specific mode of the laity's incorporation into the exercise of power and ministry in the church.

Synodality, on the other hand, touches all the persons and situations that make up life in the local churches and give concreteness to the wider church, including bishops, priests, and laypeople.²¹ What applies here above all is the principle of proportionality, such that "laypeople are in their own way [*suo modo et pro sua parte*] made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ" (LG, 31, 1).²² Proportionality is founded not on vertical or hierarchical relations but on horizontal relations based on the equal dignity bestowed on all by baptism and by virtue of the diversity of charisms and functions that emanate therefrom for the implementation of the church's mission. Medellín calls for the members of communities in the church "to live in accord with the vocation to which they have been called; to carry out the priestly, prophetic, and royal functions that God has entrusted to them," and to make of them "a sign of God's presence in the world (*Ad Gentes* 15)" ("Pastoral de conjunto," 11). The starting point for this development is the *communio fidelium*, which has a relational logic faithful to the conciliar spirit of a "People of God" ecclesiology and stresses the relational dynamics of responsibility and mission rather than juridical and philosophical principles.²³

In its implementation of the spirit of the Council, Medellín effectively articulated the *sensus fidelium* of all the faithful and the *munus docendi* of the hierarchy. This made it possible for those attending to participate in decision-making and to exercise the church's prophetic dimension. What was achieved was a *singularis antistitum et fidelium conspiratio* (*Dei verbum*, 10), that is, a singular synergy among all the members of the assembly through dialogue and discernment, leading to collaborative redaction of the assembly's conclusions. This *conspiratio* shaped the way in which synodality was

²¹Corecco, "Sinodalitá," 1490.

²²Corecco, "Sinodalitá," 1491.

²³See *Lumen gentium*, 13.

articulated by the conference—and this apart from determining whether there was any exercise of co-responsibility, any delegation of consultative function, or any clarity as to who had the right to vote. In other words, the synodal spirit manifested at Medellín presupposed a model of church as People of God that gave primacy to the *sensus fidei* and to the *sensus fidelium* (LG 12). Thus, the infallibility *in credendo* of the whole People of God—experienced in a concrete historical reality—was the context within which the pastors' infallibility *in docendo* was exercised.

We can add that the Medellín Conference inaugurated a new way of being church, presenting a programmatic vision defined by a synodal spirit and style and allowing for the exercise of collegiality in a contextual, unthematized manner. This synodal spirit, by encouraging the “experience of the communion of one and all which is the Church,” led to the embrace of “unity amid differences.”²⁴ Fitting here are the words of José Beozzo: “No other continent had an event comparable to Medellín, which was an exemplary case of a continental and collegial reception of Vatican II. It was carried out faithfully but at the same time selectively and creatively with respect to the principal inspirations of the Council.”²⁵

The first person to acknowledge explicitly that something new was transpiring was Cardinal Landazuri Ricketts. In his closing discourse, he stated:

The word “collegiality,” if we fully accede to its theological and pastoral demands, can help us make our arguments more effectively. During these days we have witnessed something audacious, though its import is still unclear: Latin America has begun to have a dynamic of its own. Our collegiality is defined by this fact... We have received the Spirit the Lord promised us, and in that Spirit our collegiality is a fact and an event. Therefore, what the experience of these days tells us is that this *Second General Conference*, with its new spirit and style, will begin when it concludes. The conference is a starting point that has given us a deeper awareness of what we are. Collegiality does not require physical proximity. Therefore, our experience of these days gives us a firm hope that we will continue living this unity in plurality.²⁶

In his judgment, collegiality was not something graded or hierarchical but rather something that functioned in terms of its own internal and relational dynamic. Since this was so, he could affirm

²⁴ See J. Botero Restrepo, *Celam. Elementos para su historia*, Bogotá: Editorial Copiyepes, 1982, 166.

²⁵ J.O. Beozzo, *A Igreja do Brasil no Concílio Vaticano II: 1959–1965*, São Paulo: Paulinas, 2005, 537.

²⁶ Ricketts, “Discurso de clausura,” 249.

that “it does not require physical proximity” but is rather consummated in relations and attitudes.

Our experience of these days gives us a firm hope that we will continue living this unity in plurality. Prayer, reflection, dialogue, mutual concern—these are the attitudes that have characterized our sessions, and they should remain in our hearts now that we are returning to our local churches.²⁷

We can quote here the work of Bernard Franck, who stated that

The essence of synodality, nonetheless, is a spirit instead of a principle. It is one of the privileged manifestations of the Christian spirit that resides essentially in human fraternity, which is derived in turn from acknowledgement of the paternity of God, who creates all human beings and grants them his being (as sons and daughters in the Son by the Holy Spirit). This fraternity, consequence and fruit of a twofold divine grace, is expressed through the communion of our hearts and the humanity of our spirits.²⁸

In sum, in Medellín there was an attitude of mutual listening and fraternal acceptance that is able to unleash a collective process—*de facto* or *de jure*—of discernment and of convergence among persons. Mejía’s testimony moves in this direction.

Here we live and work and pray for fifteen days, until September 7th. The three hundred people ... attending the conference fraternize at table, at liturgical celebrations, and in discussions. Such leveling of cardinals, archbishops, vowed religious, and laymen and laywomen is already real progress and a good sign for the future. No church conference could have done this five years ago. And I confess that nobody seems to be uncomfortable. The liturgy makes a contribution, for that is its proper role and its efficacy. Most priests concelebrate (not all, unfortunately), which means that all of a sudden more than two hundred concelebrants leave the triple sacristy in procession to take their places in the elegant oval of the church, with the altar at one end. A layperson reads the epistle. There is a lot of fine singing. Communion is given under both species. The new canons are used. The kiss of peace is shared among all. We really pray, and we are transformed.²⁹

The description offered by theologian Gilles Routhier focuses on the precise meaning of this type of synodality.

Synodality, which is a constitutive dimension of the Church and belongs to its very nature, appeals to the practices, the institutional figures, and the procedures that allow it to be carried out. Otherwise, it is reduced to a vague sentiment... [O]n the one hand, we find practices of listening,

²⁷Ricketts, “Discurso de clausura,” 248.

²⁸Ricketts, “Discurso de clausura,” 77.

²⁹Mejía, “El pequeño Concilio,” 653.

consultation, and dialogue; on the other, we find an institutional figure capable of practicing synodality. There are three actions or practices that concretely describe what dialogue is: expressing an opinion, listening, and taking advice.³⁰

The conference highlighted this relational and practical dimensions, and it stressed procedures that would foster the strong bonds that give meaning to the Christian experience, the purpose always being “to reach all sectors of the People of God and create a single ecclesial consciousness in bishops, priests, religious, laypeople, and all movements and associations” (“Pastoral de conjunto,” 35). The assembly went so far as to criticize church structures that it considered out of tune with the Council’s orientation, and it did so in language that reflected the need to give new life to a synodal way of proceeding.

Among the realities we view negatively are the following: (a) the inadequacy of the traditional structures of many parishes in providing a true community experience; (b) a quite generalized impression that diocesan curias are administrative bureaucracies; (c) the distress of many priests at not finding decisive solutions to some priestly crises, and also, by analogy, to the crises of a large number of religious and laypeople; (d) individualistic attitudes in persons and institutions in situations that require good coordination; (e) cases where collaborative ministry or planning has been poorly practiced, the reasons for which may be sheer improvisation, technical incompetence, excessive valuation of “plans,” or an excessively rigid and authoritarian conception of their place in pastoral practice (“Pastoral de conjunto,” 4).

Ambience and Working Methods

The novelty of extended collegiality was, for Beozzo, “etched in the *working methods* adopted at Medellín and also partly in the votes that were taken.”³¹ Besides adapting the tone and the method of *Gaudium et spes*, the Medellín Conference took place in an environment of discernment that fostered an attitude of listening and dialogue in small groups and plenary sessions. The initial deliberations that took place led to focusing on sixteen key areas, the study and discussion of which would culminate in the sixteen documents that formed the final text. McGrath recalled that “it [had been] decided not to arrive at the conference with a pre-existing text to which only amendments would be made. The method we followed was very different. The first few days would

³⁰G. Routhier, “La synodalité dans l’Église locale,” *Scripta Theologica* 48 (2016) 695–696.

³¹Beozzo, “Medellín,” 833.

be dedicated to listening and followed by discussions in small groups and plenary sessions.”³²

The participants at the assembly were confident in their ability to create something new through the style of work they had set in place. Since they were not starting out with a pre-determined method that was to be applied, it was possible to require the approval of everyone attending the assembly, not just the bishops. This was the case even though the participants were theoretically divided into voting members and simple participants (those without the right to vote).³³ The work of reflection and redaction was done in the commissions and in small teams; the texts were then discussed by all in the plenaries,³⁴ which were attended “not only by the bishops but by many priests, religious, and laity, thus opening up a new style of collaboration in the Church’s work.”³⁵

This dynamic gave rise to a genuine *conspiratio*, which was possible because of what Routhier called *a disposition to listen and learn*, the basis of every form of synodal action. A disposition like this is ultimately something that cannot be prescribed, since it depends on the ways in which we relate to one another and treat one another.

Synodal life therefore requires another element, a readiness to listen and to take seriously and with care what is said. It is a matter of attitude. Synodality cannot be reduced to a formal mechanism, as if the establishment of institutional figures and the implementation of procedures and consequent practices were enough to enable us to live. On

³²The text that follows adds that “the first two presentations treated of the ‘signs of the times’ and how to interpret them as Christians in Latin America. To that end, the assembly adapted the tone and the method of *Gaudium et Spes* as an example to be followed in the whole session.” McGrath, “Algunas reflexiones,” 164.

³³Some 247 people had the right to participate in the assembly, although seven of them could not attend. Of those who attended, 130 were voting members and 110 were participants who had voice but no vote. The non-voting group included laypeople, women religious, invited experts, and non-Catholic observers. The topic of voting is further elucidated in Múnica, “Crónica de la II Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano,” *Theologica Xaveriana* 349 (1968) 397-398.

³⁴“The methodology adopted by the assembly for pacing its work was twofold: group meetings and plenary sessions. For the former, the bishops divided themselves according to [which of] the sixteen topics ...were of greatest concern to them, and working commissions were set up for each topic. Each commission had the task of working on a document to be submitted to the plenary sessions, where all those attending the assembly would debate what had come forth from the group sessions. Ultimately, then, it was the plenary assembly whose job it was to unify the various topics in order to give them its approval and create the final document.” J. Jaramillo Martínez, “Una crónica de Medellín,” *Cuestiones Teológicas y Filosóficas* 63 (1998) 14-15.

³⁵C. Tovar, “Quince años de Medellín,” *Reflexión* 55 (1983) 16.

the contrary, synodality can exist where there are no established formal processes. At this infra-institutional level, it depends to a great extent on the ability of people to listen and their willingness to learn from others. It is based on the assumption that those who have the function of presiding understand well their ministry and this function of presiding over the Church of God. While the Church has been entrusted to its ordained ministers, these are not to be separated from (or empowered over) other members of the *Ecclesia Dei*. Synodality therefore requires certain attitudes and is the product of a certain spirit; it depends a lot on the relational abilities of those who hold official posts and on their ability to position themselves as brothers, friends, collaborators, and cooperators.³⁶

The foundational act of the synodal exercise that took place in Medellín was the “ability to hear faithfully the Word of God” (“Formación del clero,” 9) by means of the human words and deeds (*Dei verbum*, 2) through which God communicates himself. The word of God is heard in a specific sociocultural context that becomes a theological locus for receiving and enacting the Word and for transmitting it in a new way. Landazuri Ricketts explains this beautifully.

[We should] above all hear the voice of God and his Church and our conscience, so that we can better understand and fulfill our pastoral mission as bishops. We should also know how to listen to the voice of the world, since we are perhaps too accustomed to a “clerical” vision of the world. Sometimes we feel instinctive resentment, distrust, or fear when dealing with what is incorrectly called the “profane.” But the Word of God became human and dwells among us, thus giving meaning to all dimensions of human reality. Accordingly, whenever we listen to our fellow human beings, we are listening to Christ, and whenever we are concerned for our fellow human beings, we are concerned for Christ. To the extent that we find ourselves among our fellow human beings, drawing close to them and learning from them, we find ourselves with the Lord himself.³⁷

It is in virtue of this act of listening that Medellín reaffirmed the principle of the church’s permanent reformability (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 6), stating that

all revision of church structures, to the extent that they can be reformed, should be done to satisfy the demands of concrete historical situations, but also with an eye to the church’s nature. The revision should be carried out in view the present situation of our continent, and it should be inspired and oriented by the two guiding principles that were greatly stressed in the Council: communion and catholicity (*Lumen Gentium*, 13) (“Pastoral de conjunto,” 5).

³⁶Routhier, “La synodalité dans l’Église locale,” 701.

³⁷J. Landazuri Ricketts, “Discurso inaugural en Bogotá (26 de agosto de 1968)” en CELAM 47 (ed. por), *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio*. Ponencias, Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1968, 47.

The need to reexamine church and social structures derived not from the church's reflection on itself but from its reflection on its mission in the Latin American and Caribbean world. Therefore, the reflection was far removed from any self-referential and clericalist perspective, and it recognized that "for an analysis of this type it is necessary to listen more to experts and laypeople" ("Pastoral de las élites," 4). This required that laypeople be members of commissions, functioning not as simple advisors to clerics but as autonomous and authoritative contributors who offer their reflections on the subjects pertinent to each commission, according to their expertise.

In this spirit of horizontal listening, the first thing participants in the assembly at Medellín did was to listen to a series of concrete facts about the Latin American reality that were not well known in traditional ecclesial circles. This helped form the strong social sensibility and clear pastoral orientation that would characterize all the group discussions at the conference, as well as the documents that resulted from it. Bishop Samuel Ruiz recalled that Medellín's reception of the Council involved "changing the conception and attitude by which we place the Church outside the world and against it. The Church is the People of God engaged in making history; the Church is in the world."³⁸ Accordingly, the foremost disposition proposed by the bishops was listening in order to serve. "We want to show sincere respect for all men and women, and we want to listen to them in order to help them with their problems and their anxieties" ("Pobreza de la Iglesia," 18).³⁹ This act of listening took place while recognizing and honouring the *sensus fidei* of the People of God, for it is the same God who communicates himself through them. The collegial response consists of interpreting what has been heard while paying special attention to the cry of the poor. The bishops at Medellín repeated the words Paul VI addressed to the poor farmers of Colombia: "We hear the cry that rises up from your suffering" ("Pobreza de la Iglesia," 2).

In the synodal practice of collegiality, two dimensions of listening stand out: the discernment and interpretation proper to the episcopal college assembled together, and the *conspiratio* of all members of the People of God. In other words, there is an effort to maintain the conciliar dynamic among the one (the pope), the many (the bishops), and all (the people). Such an effort is possible when there is a desire

³⁸G.S. Ruiz, "La evangelización en América Latina," in CELAM, *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio*, Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1968, 167.

³⁹https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf

to reconcile divergent positions by means of a *conspiratio* that achieves forms of ecclesial consensus, which in turn become the convictions requisite for the life of the church. Such a vision incorporates the reception of *Dei verbum*, 10 with its assertion that the deposit of the Word of God has been entrusted to “the whole People of God, united to their pastors,” who together “constitute a singular consensus” (*fidelium conspiratio*) and thus establish an essential and reciprocal relation between *sensus fidei* and magisterium. Only this situated kerygmatic configuration, based on hearing the Word in the history of the people, allows for the translation of the message into the actual forms in which it is received. This is truly an application of the conciliar principle of the pastorality of doctrine, which

requires unceasing labor so that the message of salvation contained in the scriptures, the liturgy, the magisterium, and the testimony is perceived today as the word of life. There is a constant need to express the “Gospel” in ever new ways, in relation to human forms of existence, taking into account ethical and cultural conditions and remaining always faithful to the revealed Word (“Catechesis,” 15).

Therefore, to achieve this, the Conference understood that authentic ecclesial reform was not to be reduced to simple change of structures or of persons running the structures; rather, it would concentrate on ways of assisting the flow of communication among the structures and among those operating within them, and thus facilitate the synodal way of working.

It is therefore essential that all the ecclesial communities remain open to the dimension of Catholic communion so that none becomes closed in on itself. This is a task particularly incumbent on the hierarchical ministers, especially on the bishops, who, collegially united with their head, the Roman Pontiff, are the principle of the catholicity of the churches. In order for such openness to be effective and not purely juridical, there must be genuine communication, upward and downward, between the base and the summit (“Pastoral de conjunto,” 8).

Synodal forms of ecclesiality or true articulation of collegiality are developed from within-outwards and from below-upwards (from base communities and parishes to hierarchical-charismatic structuring). In the words with which Landazuri Ricketts inaugurated the conference, “During these days of labor, let us be very attentive to the Christian stance – for it is Christ’s – of taking the world as it is, from below. Only in this way will we follow the incarnational road that Jesus has begun.”⁴⁰ In accord with his advice, the assembly’s reflection was always oriented toward “unity in

⁴⁰Ricketts, “Discurso inaugural en Bogotá,” 1968.

mission and diversity in charisms, services, and functions” (“La iglesia visible,”⁴¹ 7-8; “Sacerdotes,” 7), to allow for differentiated participation of the People of God. The distinction being made was not hierarchical; rather, there was a horizontal and reciprocal differentiation of members by reason of the “threefold prophetic, priestly, and kingly function of Christ” incumbent on every baptized person (“La iglesia visible,” 8). This foundation made possible an “organic and articulated” way of proceeding (“Pastoral de conjunto,” 9) that enabled each member to contribute something to the other members according to his or her specific function and place in the church and society. Thus there was, for example, discussion of what was most proper to “the layperson’s commitment to liberation and humanization in the world” (“La iglesia visible,” 9.13).

The conciliar spirit of *Lumen gentium*, 37 was deepened at Medellín through the support for attitudes conducive to thinking, discerning, and planning as a body. The Council had affirmed the value of this type of genuine, organic communication, which moves from the base upward.

The laity are, by reason of the knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church... Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Let them willingly employ their prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action.

The Conference saw this model exemplified in the small Christian base communities: they are “the first and fundamental ecclesial nucleus, and they should, at their own level, take responsibility for enriching and spreading of the faith, as well as for fostering the worship which is its expression.” These communities are the “embryonic cells of ecclesial structuring and evangelizing, and actually a primary force for human flourishing and development” (“Pastoral de conjunto,” 10). The reason for promoting base communities is that they allow for the exercise of the fraternal spirit of synodality, something not found nowadays in the structure of parishes based on territory rather than on homogeneous communities.

Christians should be able to experience the communion to which they have been called in their base communities, that is, in local or regional communities that correspond to the reality of homogenous groups and

⁴¹https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf

that allow for personal and fraternal relationships among their members ("Pastoral de conjunto," 10).

The new ecclesial context envisions the parish, within the framework of the synodal spirit, as a "vivifying and unifying pastoral ensemble of base communities" ("Pastoral de conjunto," 13). The parish acts to facilitate the interaction between the communities that belong to it; it is not an end in itself, as a closed space, but is rather a community of communities. In other words, it is analogous to the universal church, which is one institution in the midst of others in society and contributes to local development. Such a view adds clarity to the affirmation above regarding Christians experiencing communion in base communities, which enable the formation of personal and fraternal relationships among members ("Pastoral de conjunto," 10). Even more important, "the community will be formed to the extent that its members have a sense of belonging, a sense of being 'we'" ("Pastoral popular," 13).⁴² This "we" will enable true upward and downward communication, properly aligned with the dynamics of belonging and reciprocity that it creates, through the collaboration and representation of the "People of God in the diversity of their conditions and states of life" ("Pastoral de conjunto," 18). This path not only leads to authentic declericalization and decentralization of the church, it rescues its properly missionary dimension and promotes co-participation in its governance ("Pastoral de conjunto," 19).

Conclusion

The Medellín Conference signified a reception of the Council that allowed the Latin American church to position itself as a "wellspring" church, a church that had not only created, with the formation of CELAM, a collegial form of continental interaction but had also inaugurated a spirit of being and working and a mode of interaction that gave rise to a synodal way of proceeding as part of its identity. As we have seen in this article, the reception of the Council's ecclesiology of the People of God *fidei* is key to understand the emergence of a Practice and a Style that would give identity and form to a way of being Church in Latin America. Medellín continues to extend to us its prophetic invitation to enrich and complete the exercise of collegiality in the context of a synodal spirit, a way of proceeding that should define our way of being church today.

⁴²https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf