The Third General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopate took place last February in the Mexican city of Puebla. Without doubt it will make a profound impact upon the evangelizing action of the Church in Latin America. The documents produced at Puebla, like those produced in Medellin ten years earlier, will give rise to reflections that will find their way into the diverse pastoral plans of each nation.

Neither Medellin nor Puebla can be considered isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, each should be seen as fruits of a maturing process in which Christian people, together with their pastors, express both the depths of their anguish and their high hopes and visions. That vision encompasses raising people from subhuman situations to a fuller experience of human life. Such experience should be expected to bring people together in brotherly love and lead naturally to a greater openness to God.

This third assembly met to study problems of evangelization on a continent that, in a few years, will represent more than half of the Catholic world. The importance of the event is evident from the two years of preparation by the greater part of the continental hierarchy and from the personal interest expressed by his Holiness Pope John Paul II, who attended its inauguration. Nearly two hundred bishops came together in Puebla, an average of one bishop for every five in each Latin American country with the exception of Brazil, whose three hundred episcopal leaders were represented by one for every ten bishops. Members of the Puebla conference also included a few bishops named directly by the pope, a group of religious—men and women—secular priests, a few laymen, and a number of experts and resource people.

The theme chosen by the assembly was “Evangelization in the Present and Future of Latin America,” its content geared to the application of the broad guidelines of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical Evangelii Nuntiandi to the continent. This document is a synthesis of the Roman Synod on evangelization in which many Latin American bishops took an active part. Particularly noteworthy is its insistence on human promotion as an integral part of the Gospel. This fact has enormous implications for the Latin American continent, where human development and the dignity of the person are two immensely important themes in pastoral action. The Puebla meetings were deeply affected by the contributions of individual bishops and by the pope’s inaugural discourse—which, in fact, repeated many of the observations made by bishops in their preparatory documents.

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The pope expressed his profound faith in the strength of the Gospel and asked that the bishops continue to be teachers of the truth of Jesus Christ, the Church, and of man. He asked that Christians not mutilate the Lord’s message and that their lives be consequent with that message; that they continue to search for the identity of the Church, for the cultural and historical identity of Latin America that has been sealed in the Gospel. For, as the pontiff declared, the best of our values have been informed and enriched by the Catholic faith. In his treatment of the topic “the truth about man,” the pope insisted upon the importance of the defense of human dignity and integral development and liberation.

For this task Christians need the Social Doctrine of the Church, he said, in order that their social action be appropriate. These basic ideas are repeated again and again through the Puebla document.

Among the many aspects of evangelization that merit attention I will here confine my comments to those most directly related to the greater social problems of the continent. Puebla, in its analysis of social reality, reaffirms the thrust of Medellin incarnated in an ever-deepening commitment to the integral liberation of all Latin Americans.

A Diagnosis of the Reality. The bishops offer their socio-economic and political analyses of the continent in their role as pastor. In their desire to respond to the historical challenges of Latin American society they assume the prophetic role of announcing particular values as an inheritance from the Lord, and of denouncing injustices committed against “man,” the image of God. The anguish and hopes of men become those of the Church. The documents of Medellin denounced vigorously what they termed “institutionalized violence” and committed the Church to the task of liberation as a new form of evangelization. Puebla likewise described this reality from the standpoint of “faith.” In the transparent light of the Gospel the bishops speak of human dignity, for it is Faith that brings us to understand God in the signs of the times, to give testimony, to announce and promote Gospel values of solidarity and participation.

The bishops had the task of presenting the hopes and aspirations of their people, which they have come to know intimately through their pastoral visits and prolonged contacts. They are conscious of a “significant economic advance” that opens up the possibility of eradicating extreme poverty and of improving the quality of life of our people: “If this is possible, it then becomes an obligation.” This statement from Puebla imposes a moral obligation on all Catholics, especially on governments and rulers as stewards of the common good, upon political parties, businessmen, etc. It is to these groups that Puebla presents the challenge of solving the socio-economic problem. The bishops likewise
draw our attention to other advances, particularly a greater consciousness of personal dignity among our people and to their desire for more political and social participation. They also point out that we are making advances in terms of education and that social services are increasingly accessible to more people.

The achievements attained and the hopes manifested are overshadowed, however, by the depressing reality in each country. One highly visible aspect is the enormous contrast between two worlds that coexist in each country: “In the light of faith we see the growing rift between rich and poor as a scandal and a contradiction to our vocation as Christians....” “The luxury of a few has become an insult in light of the misery of the great masses.” “In this anguish and pain the Church discerns the presence of social sin all the greater for the fact of its existence in countries which call themselves Catholic and possess the capacity to change....” These episcopal leaders declare that the situation of inhuman poverty is the most devastating and humiliating scourge of millions of Latin Americans. It is visible in unemployment and disguised unemployment subsistence wages, malnutrition, infant mortality, inadequate housing, health problems, and unstable labor conditions. Their in-depth analysis of the situation led the bishops to conclude that “this poverty is not a transitory stage, but the product of political, social and economic structures and situations which give rise to this state of poverty along with other causes of misery.”

The above description demands both a personal conversion and profound changes in structures so that they respond to the legitimate aspirations of the masses in their search for true social justice.

As at Medellin the bishops insisted upon the need for changes in mentality, for, as they declared in 1968, “there are no new structures without new men.” The situation of extreme poverty is described in very concrete terms: “those in which we must all recognize the suffering countenance of Christ questioning and imploring us....” They delineate the pathetic faces of those described as the poor among the poor; the rural masses who live exiled from their brothers, deprived of land, in situations of extreme internal and external dependence, subjected to exploitive systems of commercialization; poorly paid workers, unable to organize for the defense of their rights, etc.

Neither has the Church forgotten the urban masses who suffer from lack of material goods even as they see the ostentation of wealth displayed by other social sectors. The bishops directed attention to the situation caused by economic models that subject man to the economy and do not hesitate to sacrifice an entire generation to the achievement of so-called “economic success,” forgetting that, as the pope has often repeated, “the economy should be at the service of man and not vice versa.” The problem of unemployment is another central concern, since it is intimately connected with the dignity of those who demand the right to work in order to sustain themselves and their families. The bishops called upon the creative imagination of men to seek out and develop future sources of work, since present economic models, with their growing mechanization, make it ever more difficult to satisfy this vital human need.

**Human Rights.** The theme of human rights was profoundly illuminated by the inaugural discourse of John Paul II. The pope insisted that we proclaim the truth about men, this man created in the image and likeness of God whose dignity and transcendental value have been trampled under foot as never before. The third part of his discourse centered upon the Church as defender and promoter of human dignity.

The bishops share with the masses “the anguish which arises from the lack of respect for their dignity as human beings....” They point out the permanent violation of the dignity of the human person when denied such fundamental rights as life, health, education, housing, work, etc. Although Medellin touched upon this theme superficially, Puebla gives a vivid description of “the anguish arising from the abuses of power typical in oppressive regimes of force.” It is, they say,

an anguish arising from systematic or selective repression, accompanied by violations of privacy, constraint without preparation, torture, exile, the suffering of so many families for the disappearance of loved ones and the absence of any news of their whereabouts, the total insecurity of arrest and detainment without judicial orders. In short, anguish in the face of a justice that has been subjugated or seriously hampered.

The Church, because of its authentic evangelical commitment, must raise its voice as it denounces and condemns these situations, above all when governments and those responsible call themselves Christians. The true image of the Church is totally distorted by certain Christians who speak continually in the name of Christ and as faithful members of the Church without realizing the contradiction between what they say and the violations of human rights for which they are directly or indirectly responsible. At the same time, the bishops denounce “the violence of guerrilla warfare, terrorism, the kidnappings of extremists of both left and right,” all of which are seen as equally destructive of the social consensus.

When people cannot participate actively in their society, when they are denied the right to form syndicates and unions, their dignity as persons is denied them. So too when they are not allowed to work out their own destinies in the political order.

The economy of the free market, legitimized by liberal ideologies, was declared by the bishops to have “accentuated the distance between rich and poor by placing capital before work and the economic before the social dimension.” They cite minority groups that have broadened their advantage at the expense of the interests of the large majority. At the same time, the bishops describe the Marxist ideologies that have permeated the working classes, students, and teachers with the promise of greater social justice. In practice, they tell us, Marxist strategies have sacrificed many Christian values or have fallen into utopian unrealities, finding inspiration in forms of politics that, because they rely on force as a fundamental instrument, increase the spiral of violence throughout society.

The bishops conclude with a consideration of the ideology of national security, which “has contributed to strengthening the totalitarian character of regimes of force, the abuse of power and violation of human rights.” In some cases these regimes have sought to legitimate their attitudes in a subjective profession of Christian faith.
The problems indicated by the Latin American bishops are also related to the subversion of Christian values and their destruction by the introduction of antivalues: materialism, individualism, consumerism, the uncontrolled ambition to mass more, the deterioration of public and private honesty, and hedonism, which leads to vice, gambling, drug addiction, alcoholism, and sexual excess.

The Roots of These Problems. The moral crisis described above is considered by the bishops as one of the causes of the present situation on the continent, a situation that impedes or weakens brotherhood and union with God. The need for structural reforms in agriculture, for example, is imperative. The present situation is rooted in and cannot be adequately considered apart from:

The Armaments Race: An object of grave concern, the bishops have called the armaments race “the great crime of our era,” the product and cause of tensions between sister nations. Together with a lack of integration among Latin American nations this has helped maintain their position as small entities, lacking in weight and strength at the conference tables of the world. Denouncing the armaments race is one of the most important acts the bishops could have made to help alleviate tensions between the Latin American countries, a situation seriously aggravated in the Southern Cone and among the Andean countries.

Economic Systems: Puebla also stresses the existence of economic systems that do not consider man as the center of society or achieve the profound changes necessary in order to arrive at a just society. Criticism of these economic systems is implicit in many of the texts of Puebla. When the document speaks of ideologies, there are clear references not only to the ideologies but to the economic systems inspired by them.

Dependence: The document also presents “the fact of economic, technological, political and cultural dependence; the presence of conglomerate multinationals which often look to their own interests at the cost of the common good of the country which has given them protection; the loss in value suffered by our raw materials when compared with the cost of finished products which must be purchased.” Dependence is presented, then, not as the sole or most influential cause of the present situation, but within the context of many other causes likewise responsible for that situation. The document distinguishes dependence as profoundly related to the theme of Integration, one of the most efficacious means for combating the evils of dependence. Only in unity can the Latin American countries hope to achieve the power of negotiation in the face of multinationals and the political powers of the First World.

The Puebla document also describes the value of the social teaching of the Church, the need for integral liberation and full commitment to the struggle for human dignity. By its very nature human dignity includes respect for the liberty of man, liberty that is not achieved without integral liberation. Human promotion and integral liberation have become concretized “in conjunction with doctrinal orientations and criteria for action which we usually term the Social Teaching of the Church.”

The bishops tell us that this teaching has its source in the Sacred Scriptures, the Fathers and great theologians of the Church, and the Magisterium of the recent popes. Earlier in the document the bishops give criteria for discerning the presence of true liberation and remind us that there are different conceptions and applications of this goal. Although common characteristics can be discovered among them, there are points of view difficult to bring to a point of adequate convergence. The bishops tell us that there are two elements, complementary and inseparable: liberation from all slavery, from personal and social sin and from all that tears apart man and society, all that has its course in egoism, and liberation for the progressive growth of the human person in communion with God and men.

The bishops present the mutilations that true liberation has suffered when “the individual and communal development of man has been forgotten, when dependence and forms of slavery have not been taken into consideration, when fundamental rights are attacked, rights that are not given by governments or earthly powers but by the Author and Father of life Himself.” It is also mutilated if we do not achieve liberation from sin with all its seductions and idolatries. Among the criteria given by the bishops, particular emphasis was placed on the importance of liberation’s “knowing how to utilize evangelical means with their unique efficacy and in its not having recourse to any type of violence, nor to the dialectic of the class struggle but that it would, on the contrary, resort only to the vigorous energy and action of Christians moved by the Spirit to respond to the cries of millions of their brothers.”

Integral liberation implies a Christian vision of the means used to achieve it. The bishops have had the experience of violence arising from differing, even antipodal, forces on the continent. Medellin was clear in its condemnation of violence, although it never excluded the traditional Christian thought in the face of evident and prolonged tyranny that attempts to violate fundamental rights. Ten years ago the bishops stated at Medellin that whether its origin be in one person or in evidently unjust structures, a revolutionary uprising—save where there is manifest long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country—produces new injustices, throws more elements out of balance and brings new disasters. A real evil should not be fought against at the cost of greater misery.

This insistence upon nonviolence should not lead some to think they can continue to abuse the Christian vocation to meekness: “They must not abuse the patience of a people who have for so many years supported conditions that those more conscious of human rights would have accepted with great difficulty....If they continue to jealously guard their privileges, defending them by the use of violent means, they will become responsible before history, for the provocation of explosive revolutions of despair. On their attitude depends in great part the peaceful future of Latin America.”

Had this call of the bishops made over ten years ago been heeded, our continent would not have had to lament the loss of so many lives and the violation of the human dignity of its masses. The great weight and swing of Puebla is to ensure that that sad experience is not repeated, to hold aloft the dignity of the person, to castigate injustices, and to point out ways in which they can best be overcome.