The bishops participating in the latest Assembly of the Latin American Bishops’ Council speak of the ‘continental mission’ of their Churches. Not projects of cultural hegemony, but a ‘pastoral conversion’ to help people’s faith. And to reach out to everyone. Amidst the processes of secularization and temptations of neoclericalism.

On Saturday morning at Constitución station, located in what is by no means a ‘good’ neighborhood in Buenos Aires, everything is moving, as always: buses, taxis, travelers going in and out of the terminal, women with shopping, police, street vendors with their carts. The youths of the parish of Santa Elisa and those of the Virgen de Caacupé have set up their yellow tent on the edge of that
perpetual whirl of human motion, alongside the monument to the insipier of the Argentine Constitution, the Mason Juan Bautista Alberdi. They call it the Carpa misionera, the missionary tent of the Catholic Church. They have set a few tables with statuettes of the Child Jesus and Saint Expedito, the saint of urgent cases. And then some of them begin quartering the whole station precinct, handing out to people waiting and passing by a holy picture of Jesus with a prayer. Many people approach to ask for a blessing, leaving in the boxes on the tables little notes asking for health and work for themselves and others, prayers and masses for their dead loved ones, happiness and rest from toil. A queue wanting confession has formed in front of Father Flavio. ‘Bautismos aquí, baptisms here’, says a banner hanging from a tree. And underneath it stands a table where two youths write down requests for baptisms. Even of those who wander up out of simple, instinctive curiosity. Since yesterday evening, since the start of the mission, the baptisms of thirteen children and adults has taken place in front of the ‘carpa católica’, people already prepared by lay catechists, with whom post-baptismal catechesis continues. At one point, unexpectedly and without warning, Father Bergoglio also arrives. The Archbishop of the city greets the young men and women one by one, and hugs Don Facundo, who immediately thunders into the megaphone: “Adelante, come over to the Carpa misionera, we’ll be celebrating Mass in a few minutes”. A street drinker also stops. At eleven in the morning he’s already a bit tipsy. He closes in on Bergoglio, looks at him in puzzlement: “I’ve seen you somewhere...”, he mutters. And adds: “Are you Catholic? Then you say Mass!” Don Facundo, while taking out vestments for the service, also asks him to say mass. Then, in front of the small group of kids, old men, mothers with children...
and chance passers-by the Jesuit Cardinal speaks a few words. “Let’s call on Jesus for all we need. Let’s ask the Father in His name, let’s ask Him to ask the Father. Like the poor who asked everything of Him when He went through the streets and they thronged around Him. Jesus is very keen to be with the rest of us, with all the rest of us, with all those passing by. It’s something that interests Him first of all. If there had been only one man or one woman in the whole world, He would have offered His life just the same, for that one man or one woman”.

For that reason Bergoglio – and Facundo, Don Flavio and all the priests of Buenos Aires who sometimes go to baptize and confess in the stations, squares and even under the obelisk in Plaza de la República, along the immense Avenida 9 de Julio – believes it is most important to make things easy, not to be selective, not to put obstacles in the way of this desire for Jesus. Embracing any hint of expectation that might spring from the fleeting and fortuitous situation that the present moment offers. Acting as the Apostle Philip did with the eunuch to whom he proclaimed the good news as they went along. “Look, here is water: what prevents me from being baptized?” the eunuch asked as they passed near a stream. “So Philip baptized him. When they were out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord spirited Philip away and the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8, 36-39).

The feeling of insecurity grows, but also the chances for encounter

“In the Gospel”, Cardinal Aloísi Lorscheider used to say, “the most beautiful encounters of God with mankind take place on the road.

An interview with Carlos Aguiar Retes, new president of the CELAM

Only humility keeps us free of blackmail

The 61 year-old, Carlos Aguiar Retes, Archbishop of Tlalnepantla (Mexico) was appointed president of the Latin American Bishops Council (CELAM) in Montevideo last 19 May, at the thirty-third ordinary assembly of the body representing the bishops of all Latin America. The bishops and other delegates from all the Latin American churches voted by an overwhelming majority to entrust him with the responsibility for a term of four years.

A graduate in Biblical Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University and a former professor of Sacred Scripture at the Pontifical University of Mexico, Aguiar is in his second term as president of the Mexican Bishop’s Conference. By personal character and for biographical reasons he well represents the ranks of bishops who after the divisions and the intra-ecclesial ideological radicalisms within the Church over the past decades are most aware of the urgent need for ‘pastoral conversion’, set out in the CELAM Aparecida Assembly document (2007) as the pressing need of the apostolic work of all the churches in Latin America.

Your Excellency, you became president of CELAM in the years when all the Churches in Latin America are being called to the ‘Continental Mission’. What is it? It it just a new formula for the ‘usual’ call to action?

CARLOS AGUIAR RETES: The Continental Mission did not arise out of nothing, like the idea of some committee. Even before
Centuries in the history of lived Christianity tell us no different. At this moment, the whole of Latin America seems like a huge train station in which everything is on the move, nothing is standing still. Where potent economic and socio-cultural processes are changing and sometimes distorting the experience of individuals and multitudes. While the Mass and the baptisms administered at the Constitución station are one concrete image – out of the many possible – of the Continental Mission that the Latin American Churches took on as their task, in these rapidly changing circumstances, in 2007 at Aparecida, at the last General Assembly of the Latin American episcopate.

Four years later, the bishops and others summoned to the 33rd Assembly of the Latin American Bishop’s Council, held in Montevideo May 15/20 last, checked on progress. They once again asked themselves questions and scrutinized the insights and the overview of the Continent set out at the Aparecida conference.

In the words and views of some of the representatives of the episcopate at that meeting, as put together by 30Days, the shared judgment is that of an unfinished and ongoing project. Where – as always happens – insights full of evangelical hope burgeon and blossom in the daily work of the pastors most involved in the lived experience of God’s people.

An initial datum helps set aside misunderstandings often fueled by clerical and anticlerical propaganda: the more pastorally aware bishops are increasingly sure that the continental mission is not a strategy or program. Nor an appeal to new militancy aimed at regaining lost positions. “The cont...
Many people continue to see the Churches in Latin America as if we were still in the ‘sixties and ‘seventies. They continue to point to the reduction of the Christian message to political ideology as the most serious threat. Is that how things really stand?

For years now the attempts to construct and impose an ideological ‘mapping’ of the members of the Church has looked futile and out of date, granted that it was ever a fitting key for really knowing the features and experiences of the Churches of Latin America. Aparecida looked at the Church as it is now, and what the Holy Spirit inspires in it now. I believe that document is itself a clear sign of how those ideological interpretations have completely fallen through. In the communion of the Church different sensibilities and different ways of focusing on things can live together.

Often the media and even the Catholic news agencies describe men of the Church as representatives of an ‘antagonist’ force to the governments and political groups that are prevailing in Latin America. Is it a plausible picture?

Compared to the historical past in Latin America a conviction is growing that the Church has to be very free in the face of governments. Respectful of constituted authority, eager to encourage all possible collaboration, but at the same time free to have its say on how society should be. Unfortunately, the ideological schematism which I mentioned earlier, and which is a wholly inappropriate way of looking to the Church, does not seem entirely superseded in some countries. Some still consider ideological discourse fundamental as guide to their government and its policies, and also as guide for the masses. But alongside the cases of those who continue with the rigid ideological approach of the old school, there are others, more pragmatic, who think of social policies as tools for solving problems.

And in your country, what problem stands out most at the moment?

One major problem in Mexico is the overall impact of drug trafficking and money laundering. Problems that cannot be solved without true international collaboration. In particular, that of the United States. They should take a much more rigid approach to preventing the passage of weapons into Mexico. Mexico does not produce weapons, there isn’t even one weapons and military hardware factory. How is it that weapons can be found so easily across the border? This is certainly a consequence of criminal activity.

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"is not a mobilization, or a list of new things to do and events to organize, but a spirit that should set its mark on every expression and detail of the life of the Church. In times of transition and great change such as we are living through, concern and a feeling of insecurity grow, but also the possibilities of encounter. For example with the eighty percent of Brazilian Catholics who in Catholic Brazil live their lives removed from the ordinary practices of the Church".

The Aparecida declaration took account of the fact that processes of secularization in Latin America are ongoing and the faith that has animated the Church and the life of the continent for five centuries is not being transmitted from generation to generation with the ease of the past. The document called on the Latin American Churches to get rid of all the "transient structures that no longer encourage the transmission of the faith" (no. 365), not to wallow in rhetorical complacency about the 'continent of hope' and 'not to take anything for granted and settled' (no. 549). The same document also did away with the pretexts of professional complainers and recriminators, expressing the hope - with a quotation from Pope Paul VI’s Evangelii nuntiandi – that “the world

lessness of a child rescued from the waves. The gratuitous and surprising sign of the love for Jesus and His Mother still alive in the hearts of most Latin Americans.

From the notion of the Church as regulator of faith to a Church as facilitator of faith
In article 264, the same document describes popular piety as a great and enduring "confession of

In this may lie the whole of the pastoral conversion that the Aparecida document set out as the fruit of gratitude and the task proper to the Churches in Latin America at the present time. In the discourse of many bishops the word most frequently used, and not at random, is cercanía, closeness. The characteristic feature of a Church that offers itself to all like ‘a mother who comes forward to greet, a welcoming home’.

Above left, near the church of San Cayetano in Buenos Aires, faithful receiving the blessing on the feast of the patron saint of work and bread; right, meals being distributed in a neighborhood canteen in Buenos Aires.
Thus the bishops in this present moment of the Church pick up the threads of continuity with the generations of their predecessors. In particular, the generation of pastors who after Vatican Council II forged the CELAM into an effective tool for witnessing to the daily sharing by local Churches in the destinies and real lives of the peoples of the continent. “Above everything else”, notes Venezuelan Baltazar Enrique Porras Cardozo, Archbishop of Mérida, “even in this time of great changes, closeness to the desires and sufferings of people remains a hallmark of the Latin American Churches, and people acknowledge this. Even in the face of the growth of violence and social degradation, always at the expense of the weakest, everyone knows they can find in the Church a reality in tune with their real desires for peace, a quiet life, security, and a concrete help in difficulties and sufferings”. He is echoed by the Capuchin friar Andrés Stanovnik, Archbishop of Corrientes: “In general, leaving aside individual cases, if there is a human reality that keeps its footing in our countries in the middle of daily life, that reality is the Church. Our Churches are not made up only of the meetings of bishops, like that of Aparecida. Those same bishops every day walk alongside their people. The priests do not live secluded in their parishes. They are with the people all day, in the streets, in soup kitchens, in country schools, in all the endless social and charitable works where they truly come across people’s struggle to continue. Only within the concrete circumstances of daily life can one share in the faith and joy for the living presence of Christ. Otherwise, any community project in the long run closes down the prospect and turns into segregation with religious pretenses”.

A certain harking-back to clericalism: the old figure of the ‘Prince’ priest

According to some bishops, the most insidious enemy of “closeness” as suggested by the Aparecida Conference is not relativism or secularism, or the prejudices of groups hostile to the Church. “The greatest resistance”, notes the Peruvian Franciscan Héctor Miguel Cabrejos Vidarte, Archbishop of Trujillo, “coincides with a certain harking-back to clericalism. Not least for that reason the pastoral conversion outlined at Aparecida primarily concerns priests and bishops. But even some organized groups and movements, which sometimes behave like cliques in search of prestige and power in the Church”, The old figure of the ‘prince’ priest seems to resurface in some situations, the representative of a privileged caste, official of a religious power, which treats even the sacraments as its own so as to assert its supremacy over the laity. Maybe throwing the weakness and hurts of people in their face, stultifying the willingness and expectations of those not in good standing with doctrinal ‘requirements’ and moral conditions imposed by a growing return to clerical strictness. One of those styles and structures that the Aparecida document defines as ‘perishable’, and that does not encourage but hinders the transmission of the faith. “It’s inevitable”, notes Archbishop Stanovnik, “that when one plans to build, to ‘make’ the Church as one’s own project and
achievement, one ends up in self-celebration”. Archbishop Porras adds: “Similar presumptions have marked the history of Catholicism in Latin America from the beginning. It’s enough to read the documents published by the Vatican on the occasion of the fifth centenary of the discovery of America. Then there were people who out of disciplinary strictness required that priests or religious be born in wedlock, reared up in respectable families, able to bestow a dowry. And already then, between the 16th and 18th centuries, hundreds and hundreds of dispensations came from Rome to get around those rigorist pretensions”.

A Church against the powers that be?
Since the days when it was led and inspired by such free spirits as Chilean bishop Manuel Larraín and Dom Hélder Câmara the CELAM has always reflected the prevailing feeling of the Latin American bishops towards the changing social and political geography of the area. That interweave of peoples and nations that Dom Hélder himself called ‘the Christian continent of the Third World’ when calling on his brethren to fight the poverty ‘that destroys the image of God in every man’.

At present the ranks of variously assorted left-wing governments in these countries are consolidating over time and growing with new additions, with leaders of diverse backing and orientation – former guerrillas, former soldiers, national-populists, pragmatic reformers – all called on to handle a booming economic situation, real processes of political integration, growing imbalances and compensatory social programs that have impact on the lives of millions of people. A continental effervescence in which the media portrayal of churchmen is routinely to dismiss them as frowning censors. Emissaries of a corporation in everlasting struggle with political leaders and governments, and stuck fast to an agenda of ethically sensitive issues: defense of life, of the family, of freedom of education.

The fact is that among the bishops who came together in Montevideo for the recent CELAM assembly, no one seemed ready to back or even expand the media cliché of the Church as a ‘belligerent’ bloc alternative to the powers that be. For all of them the characteristics cognate to ecclesial action are those of apostolic zeal and meekness. “The image of a Church as an antagonistic force”, says Venezuelan Archbishop Porras, “is convenient for governments and populist regimes that often fall into the deification of their own power. Then the Church, precisely because of its immanence in the people and the way in which it assesses social problems without messianism, is presented as a corporation in search of privileges”. According to Chilean Archbishop Ricardo Ezzati, “in political language there are those who want at times to pass off the idea that the Church structure is a factor in backwardness that reins in society and individual conscience, and who denounce its alleged attempt to reclaim a lost social and cultural monopoly. In my opinion, no confirmation should be given to the stereotype. And it should be made clear that the Church seeks no power, no hegemony. It just wants to make known to our people a message of liberation that is good for all”. Cardinal Julio Terrazas Sandoval, Archbishop of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, described the reduction of the Church to a countervailing force as a convenient caricature: “In Bolivia, in recent years, the Church waited in silence for the changes so much desired by the people. We started talking only when we heard speeches calling for the eliminating of the ‘Christian God’ and claiming there was a division between two Churches, that of the rich and that of the poor”. Colombian Rubén Salazar Gómez concludes: “Emphasizing only the intervention of the clergy on matters of sexual morality is a distortion of the media. And the Church must do everything possible to avoid the mechanism of those who paint it as an antagonistic political corporation. Showing everybody, with humility, that it seeks nothing for itself.”.