



Urban culture and pastoral conversion in Latin America

We publish the conclusions of the "Meeting on urban culture and pastoral conversion in the light of Aparecida, on the horizon of the Continental Mission" convened by the Department of Culture and Education (Culture Section of the Episcopal Latin-American Council)

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Introduction

"God lives in the city" (DA 514). This certainty deep of faith has encouraged the pastors of Latin America and the Caribbean gathered at the conference of Aparecida to pay attention to the many aspects of the current urban culture and to recognize in it and to assume from it the challenges of a new urban pastoral (DA 509-519).

To seek ways for a deep pastoral conversion to this new invitation from God, the Department of Culture and Education of the CELAM, through the Section Culture, held a meeting on urban culture and pastoral conversion, in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, from 1 to 5 March 2010. It has counted on the valuable collaboration of eleven exhibitors, who have enriched the vision of the fascinating and complex world of our cities, from diverse angles. They have tried to take advantage of the vast urban experience that the Church has had since its origins and in all its history, especially in our continent (cf. DA 513).

As a general framework of this pastoral reflection, we start from the historical rereading and a pastoral projection of the path traveled by the Latin American Church in the four general conferences of the episcopate in the post council and the various plans, initiatives, meetings, and publications of the CELAM. The phenomenon of the growing urbanization (Medellín) led to propose the evangelization of the modern city (Puebla), new enculturation of the Gospel in the culture of our cities (Santo Domingo) and a new urban pastoral in a more missionary Church (Aparecida) (Pbro. Dr. Carlos Maria Galli).

The city has been presented as an intercultural reality (R. P. Dr. Jorge Roberto

Seibold, S.J.) nothing free from the influences of relativism (Mgr. Dr. Alfredo Horacio Zecca). In this cultural dimension, the city integrates various aspects of popular culture (Pbro. Dr. José Carlos Camaño). Much more than its immediately tangible reality, the city is built through the imaginary of the citizens (Pbro. Lic. Jaime Alberto Mancera). They are who configure in very different ways the universes of meaning, constituting true and own invisible cities within the big city (Pbro. Jorge Eduardo Scheinig). The means of social communication in urban culture provoke transformations of unprecedented depth and celerity (Pbro. Lic. Jorge Oesterheld). The city also reveals to this view its fragilities: isolation, loneliness, uprooting, anonymity, voragine, fugacity (Prof. Antonio Pérez García).

The pastoral perspective requires a deepening of the theological-key gaze. Thus in the urban culture different realities are recognized in the religious field, among which are counted the values of the popular piety that contrast with other phenomena: agnosticism, indifference, religious syncretism, "New Age" practice and secularism (Pbro. Dr. Juan Roger Rodríguez Ruiz), and some guiding criteria are set out towards a theology of the city (Dr. Virginia Raquel Azcuy). As an inspiring example for evangelization in the city, the experience of the Apostle Saint Paul, who was an urban evangelizer who took over the communication networks and the natural areas of encounter within the cities, is still in effect, including the Mediterranean synagogues. To achieve this, it was not accidental the simultaneous knowledge and dominance, which Paul had, of the languages and cultures: Jewish, Greek and roman (Pbro. Dr. Gerardo Söding).

The exhibitions helped to encourage debates, group workshops and plenary sessions with participants. These conclusions try to reflect, in a brief synthesis, some more relevant aspects of an experience of dialogue and exchange, which have turned out to be enlightening, rich, dense, challenging, so it would require to be pursued.

Conclusions

The title of the meeting: "Urban Culture and Pastoral Conversion" was a very particular challenge: we must be able to assume the urban as a multifaceted cultural scenario that is now possible to re-evangelize. Pastoral conversion requires us to know and explore carefully the different urban scenarios, their multiple languages, fractures, and identities, to be able to identify with them, to dominate their plural forms of communication and to learn new ways of being "close relations" in the big city. Therefore we propose:

1. The awareness of the urban culture in the pastoral

Diverse attempts of pastoral responses, still partial, in many of our local churches, indicate that there is some awareness of this problem that, however, is perceived as still scarce, germinal of slow and progressive growth, she still needs strong impulses to expand and extend to the different initiatives and realities of a more

incisive, successful, uncultured and effective urban pastoral, in the-very diverse and, at the same time, similar-cities of Latin America and the Caribbean.

2. The complexity and ambiguity of urban culture

One aspect of conversion is the initial attitude with which we seek to look at the reality of urban culture. We have made the attempt to contemplate it from within: engaging in it. We have looked at it as a pastoral challenge and not predominantly as a crushing, negative or threatening confusion, because of its most unknown and fearsome aspects (cf. DA 513).

We resorted to some binomials (cf. DA 512) to express: both the complexity and the ambiguity of the urban culture. They are shown from: the personal experiences and the socially known problems the bonds that are established and the ruptures that suffer the opportunities of greater humanity and the new inhuman realities the urban centers, the suburban peripheries, the networks of cities and the increasing influence of the city in rural areas knowledge and affection the spaces and flows the inhabitants, the travelers and the excluded, the local and the global information and communication, the dispersion and concentration. the experience of the rootlessness and the new forms of neighborhood, the rural and the urban, the cultural plurality and the intercultural dialogue, the possibilities of communion and the new injustices and exclusions, the human and the divine that shape the "mystery" in the city with pastoral agents that are seen both inside and outside the urban context.

These and other contrasting realities traverse the urban culture with all the ranges of light, shadows, and amplitude of gray, characteristic of human freedom in history; and they demand a careful paschal discernment of the signs or indications of life and death.

3. The need for multiple approaches to urban culture

"Culture" includes a set of links (cf. DA 476) and, as such, calls for collaboration between the various sciences of the human. In the "city" many simultaneous "languages" are spoken and no one can, at present, communicate and discern all of them. Both from the evangelizing orientation of the pastors and, above all, from the thought, experience, and action of their secular citizens, interdisciplinary work is required.

It will be important to identify and clarify the limits of each discipline and its method to better understand the current urban culture. The approaches of the human and social sciences are partial, and they require a dialogue between them and of them with the philosophy and with the theology.

4. The discernment required

Assumptions the analyses that the human sciences bring, at its various levels, we refer to "discernment" in its level "theological" and "sapiential", and therefore: proper theological and pastoral. Discernment is required on attitudes (how to get out of routine or inertia?) about the Church in the city (how to get out of perplexity?) and strategies for action (how to respond creatively?).

It will be necessary to determine and engage specifically the various subjects, particularly the faithful laics, who have discerned the new signs of the present times in the urban world, to reformulate the various instances of life and pastoral action.

As an expression of our Trinitarian and Christocentric faith, theological discernment attends to the action of the divine people in the culture/s. Believing that "God dwells in the City" implies discerning the Father in his salvific providence, the Son Jesus Christ in the signs of the Kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit in the "signs" or "germs" of a full life that arouses. It is necessary to discover, recognize and cultivate all this divine work in the midst of and through all the ambiguities and complexities of life and the coexistence of the citizens of our cities, who rarely seem to refer to the divine only as absence or yearning.

In this arduous common work, it will be necessary to pay more attention to the current expressions of religiosity and the popular "mystic" (cf. DA 262), and to review critically the styles and languages used by the various areas of pastoral life (first announcement, mission, liturgy, catechesis and preaching) to verify whether they effectively respond to the new challenges (cf. DA 517d) presented in the cities.

The contemplation of the love of God Trinity "inclined" towards the suffering human being, again requires from the depths of the Christian faith the discernment (where it is given) and the realization (where it is claimed) of the Divine Mercy in the gestures of human compassion and of pastoral charity to all the multiple forms of "urban suffering" (DA 517j). The faces of the poor as always and the new: they are a call to make them present, near and alive, the merciful love of the Father, in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, and with Mary.

5. Suggestions and proposals for the conversion and pastoral action

Within the general framework proposing the event of Aparecida about the urban pastoral ministry (cf. da 517) and the agents that make it (cf. da 518), the participants of this meeting have been allowed to emphasize some aspects. It becomes necessary to deepen the reflection and systematic study of this reality, as vast and complex as it is challenging, to accompany the growth of the ecclesial consciousness and the audacity of a pastoral action marked by the conversion and the renewal in the languages and styles of communication.

In general terms, this calls for the development of a much more determined laic

protagonism, not only from the professional spheres of its own but also from its specific spirituality. It is they who today live and develop the city. It is necessary to promote, with daring creativity, the new ministries and lay services that the city requires, such as: listening, health, research, communication, accompaniment, relief, education, solidarity, etc.

The change in mentality involved in pastoral conversion also requires common work, avoiding the individualism that leads to widespread discouragement. The exercise of pastoral discernment must involve all levels: regions, dioceses, deaneries or grouping of parishes, parishes, neighborhoods, sectors and urban tribes. As well as planning and pastoral action closer and capillary, on the occasion of the typical meetings of daily life in the cities. The conversion also asks for a greater and more visible public presence of the Church in the life of the city (cf. DA 517k). It is necessary to "go" to the urban both in its centers and in its existential peripheries (cf. DA 517j), with a presence and active participation.

Without neglecting the specific instances such as synods, assemblies, meetings, forums, and congresses, the most concrete proposals are concentrated in four areas of research and theological-pastoral formation of a permanent nature: a. That the ITEPAL initiate a specific section dedicated to the study and promotion of Urban Pastoral, where all work can be collected and systematized from the Second Vatican Council, deepen the theological and interdisciplinary reflection, and offer an original service that illuminates and orients the evangelizing mission of the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean, because 80% of its current population lives in cities. b. That the bishops' conferences, national or regional, form Reflection Teams on this subject. In each country, the headquarters of this team can be a diocese or an archdiocese located in a large metropolis or a megalopolis. c. That Catholic Universities, through faculties, institutes, departments, chairs or projects of various kinds, collaborate in raising awareness, research, reflection, and training about urban culture, evangelization and pastoral action in the city. d. That the Episcopal Conferences promote and protect the popular religiosity, patrimony of all the social sectors, and "precious treasure of the Catholic Church in Latin America" (Benedict XVI).

All these works have to arrive, effectively and adequately, to impregnate the various posterior instances of formation: catechesis, mission, liturgy, spirituality, lay vocation, etc.

The Spirit encourages the mission and only he makes possible the conversion of all who opens to his action. With the confidence that with our work we can hear his voice and follow his footsteps, we renew our citizen commitment as members of the pilgrim people of God to the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. We look forward to that fulfillment that "is already being done in Jesus Christ" (Da 515) and we anticipate it in the missionary walk so that our peoples "can find in Christ the fullness of life" (Da 518).