



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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1. The third General Conference of the Latin-American Episcopate is an event on which the attention of the whole Church is concentrated. It arouses great interest even in circles outside the Church. The fact that this is already the third Conference testifies that its history, though short, is, however, very significant and fruitful.

In 1955 Pope Pius XII decided to convoke the *first General Conference* of the Latin-American Episcopate—which was celebrated at Rio de Janeiro from 25 July to 4 August 1955—to examine the religious problems which, even then, were causing great concern in the whole Continent. It was a kind of scrutinizing of the signs of the times, in order to draw indications of more and more suitable ways for the renewal and strengthening of the apostolic activity of the Church. In particular, the shortage of clergy, which emerged with dramatic obviousness, showed the necessity of seeking closer collaboration at the continental level, the instrument of which was to be a council representing all the national Episcopates. The *institution of CELAM* was the first and most important result of the Conference: a dynamic result, open to developments which took on growing importance and an increasingly rapid tempo.

In 1968 Pope Paul VI, in order to be able to adapt the mission of the Church better to the needs of Latin America in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, convoked the *second General Conference* of the Latin-American Episcopate, celebrated at Medellin from 24 August to 6 September (1968). The main purpose of the meeting was study of the subject: "The Church in the present transformation of Latin America in the light of the Second Vatican Council".

The details indicated above give sufficient information about the way in which, in the course of the decades, this splendid organ of collegiality of the present Episcopate in the Latin-American

Continent was formed and developed. At this moment it is the principal subject of the event called "Puebla" for short.

2. This abbreviation, as is known, comes from the name of the Mexican city in which the third General Conference of the Latin-American Episcopate is taking place. I had the great fortune to be able to open it personally, presiding, on Saturday 27 January, over the concelebration in the sanctuary of the Mother of God at Guadalupe, and delivering, on Sunday 28 January, an address at the beginning of the work, in the building of the Major Seminary at Puebla.

In any case, I would like to call attention particularly to the method of work and to the insight and precision with which the Conference was prepared.

Before arriving at the formulation of the principal texts contained in the "Documento de trabajo" (back-ground document), which consists of 172 pages altogether, the individual Episcopal Conferences of Latin America, following the general plan of the "Documento de consulta" (consultation document), worked at preparing their own opinions, remarks, and proposals with regard to the subject of the third Conference, which was formulated as follows: "Evangelization in the present and future of Latin America". It is clear that the sources of this subject were sought mainly in the work of the ordinary Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops which took place in Rome in the years 1974 and 1977. We recall that the subject of those Assemblies was respectively "Evangelization in the modern world" and "Catechesis with particular regard to the young".

The fruit of the exchange of experiences, proposals, and suggestions of the 1974 Synod of Bishops was Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, one of the most characteristic, significant, and fruitful documents of his pontificate.

Such is the genesis of the present Conference of CELAM, as regards its subject. As can be seen, it is very limpid. The initiative of dealing with this subject of a universal-ecclesiastical character, that is, "Evangelization" with reference to Latin America, goes back to the year 1976. In any case, the whole cycle of preparation took two whole years. In this period, the National Episcopal Conferences, setting great store also by the suggestions offered by individual members of the local ecclesial communities, prepared their contribution for the drawing up of the "Background Document"; that is, the Document which was to serve as a reference point for the work of the Puebla Conference, and which was to serve as a basis for the exchange of experiences, proposals and suggestions. This is just what is now being done at Puebla.

The individual Episcopal Conferences, as well as being represented by their respective Presidents, have nominated a number of delegates, in proportion to the global number of bishops belonging to the Conference. Furthermore, representatives of the various members of the People of God, priests, men and women religious, deacons, and laity, have been invited to Puebla.

3. The above particulars regarding the Puebla Conference are perhaps already known to some of my listeners today. I thought it opportune, however, to summarize them now for two reasons.

First, out of consideration for the importance of the event which bears the name "Puebla". At the same time, to express my joy at seeing the teaching on the collegiality of the Episcopate, recalled by the Second Vatican Council, become incarnate in life in such a splendid way and bear fruit in our days.

It would be worthwhile to open again here the text of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* at chapter three, and re-read all its sections carefully.

It would be necessary to recall to mind many passages of *Christus Dominus*, the decree on the pastoral duties of bishops.

Let us dwell on some sentences: "Just as, in accordance with the Lord's decree, St Peter and the rest of the apostles constitute a unique apostolic college, so in like fashion the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, are related with and united to one another. The very ancient discipline whereby the bishops, installed throughout the whole world, lived in communion with one another and with the Roman Pontiff in a bond of unity, charity, and peace; likewise the holding of councils in order to settle conjointly, in a decision rendered balanced and equitable by the advice of many, all questions of major importance; all this indeed points clearly to the collegiate character and structure of the episcopal order, and the holding of ecumenical councils in the course of the centuries bears this out unmistakably" (*Lumen Gentium*, 22).

The Council is the fullest expression of the collegiality of the episcopal office in the Church. Its other manifestations do not have such a fundamental significance. However, they are very necessary, useful, and sometimes absolutely indispensable. This applies both to collegial institutions—among the latter, it is the Episcopal Conferences that are developing mainly in the Western Church now—and also to the various forms of collegial activity.

The present Conference at Puebla is just this form of collegial activity of the Latin-American Episcopate. Certainly, both the individual collegial institutions and also the forms of collegial activity of the Episcopates correspond particularly to the requirements of our times.

4. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, speaking of the collegiality of the Bishops, also uses the expression "episcopal body" (*corpus episcopate*). This seems to contain an even deeper analogy with regard to the whole Church, which St Paul, as we well know, called "the body of Christ" (cf. Rom 12: 5; 1 Cor 1:13; 6:12-20; 10:17; 12: 12, 27; Gal 3:28; Eph 1:22-23; 2: 16; 4:4; Col 1:4; 3:15). As regards this analogy, we are already entering deeply into the intimate mystery of the Church: the union of life, which she draws from Christ.

The "corpus episcopate" concerns the most important exterior structure of the Church: her hierarchical unity. In any case, this exterior structure remains in the service of the interior mystery of the Church, of the Mystical Body of Christ. Just for this reason and for this purpose it, that is, this structure, is also a "body": the episcopal body or college.

In the period in which this college, that is, the "body", is dedicating its work to the problem of the evangelization of the South-American continent "in the present and in the future", it must be hoped that the *Lord Jesus* himself is present in the midst of its members and through them. For we read in the above-mentioned constitution *Lumen Gentium* as follows:

"In the person of the bishops, then, to whom the priests render assistance, the Lord Jesus Christ, supreme high priest, is present in the midst of the faithful. Though seated at the right hand of God the Father, he is not absent from the assembly of his pontiffs; on the contrary, indeed, it is, above all, through their signal service that he preaches the Word of God to all peoples, and administers without cease to the faithful the sacraments of faith; through their paternal care (cf. 1 Cor 4:15) that he incorporates, by a supernatural birth, new members into his body; finally, through their wisdom and prudence, that he directs and guides the people of the New Testament on their journey towards eternal beatitude." To them, in fact, "is entrusted the duty of affirming the Gospel of the grace of God" (cf. Rom 15:16; Acts 20:24) and the glorious ministry of the Spirit and of justice (cf. 2 Cor 3:8-9) (*Lumen Gentium*, 21.)

My Apostolic Blessing to you all.

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