

Christian Base Communities in Peru: Lessons for North America

Abstract

This research hopes to bridge the gap between the churches of North and South America by advocating for Christian base communities (CEBs) in North America. It is necessary to look at Catholic Action in conjunction with Catholic social thought, as well as the Second Vatican Council. Finally, personal interviews with those involved with CEBs in two districts of Lima, Peru – Villa El Salvador and El Agustino, revealed there is a failure of CEBs to develop in those two respective areas. Despite the failure of CEBs to develop in those areas, CEBs are relevant to North America as they can contribute lessons for parishes in the U.S. The Catholicism in CEBs in Peru is not prevalent in North America because the standard is to focus on individual spirituality and there is a lack of emphasis on social Catholicism.

Introduction¹

One characteristic of Latin American Christianity is the development and spread of Christian base communities (CEBs).² In order to understand these communities, it is necessary to look at Catholic Action in conjunction with Catholic social thought, which was an early attempt to empower lay people in the Catholic Church. Second, it is important to take into account the Second Vatican Council, particularly its new idea of the Church as the People of God, whose responsibility is to transform the world in the direction of the Kingdom of God. Finally, it is helpful to speak to those involved with CEBs based on personal interviews in two districts of Lima, Peru – Villa El Salvador and El Agustino. After remarking on the failure of CEBs to develop in those two respective areas, it is possible to glean lessons for North America in addition to discovering what CEBs could offer parishes in the United States.

Catholic Action

Catholic Action began in Italy in the late nineteenth century, “...as an instrument for influencing society after the Church had lost political power as a result of the unification of Italy in 1870.”³ At a historic Latin American conference, Catholic Actionists gathered in 1953 at Chimbote, Peru. They perceived the Catholic Church in Latin America “in need of a profound revitalization” and lacking a dimension that was relevant to people in their context.⁴ The transition from a largely otherworldly piety to a this-worldly consciousness was both demanding and energizing, yet it made for a smooth transition to CEBs.

The mission of Catholic Action was “to focus on the individual, toward their personal spiritual life, and to have people then become aware of social processes, out in the world, through the model of see, judge, act.”⁵ Although Catholic Action incorporated the European outlook of focusing on the individual spiritual self, it took a revolutionary role by also focusing on social Catholicism through the model of see-judge-act. Deconstructing this method implies the following, respectively: 1) describe as accurately as possible the reality with which the Church is confronted, 2) reflect on that condition in light of the Bible and tradition, and 3) plan for action to improve the situation.⁶ In fact, the base communities in Peru were formed out of the see-judge-act model that came out of Catholic Action.⁷

These notions from Catholic Action that include social Catholicism would be later encompassed in the method of CEBs. Therefore, Catholic Action was one of the necessary precursors that brought about a transformation of the Latin American Church. Another significant influence was the social teaching of the popes in the early twentieth century.

Birth of Catholic Social Thought

Although Catholic Action and the birth of Catholic social thought are treated as two separate sections, they are coincident with each other in the latter part of the nineteenth century and should be regarded together. The Vatican formally addressed the issue of social

¹ I wish to thank the College of Arts and Sciences at Creighton University and the Center for Undergraduate Research and Scholarship (CURAS) for a Summer Research Grant to pursue this work. I also wish to thank Professor Thomas Kelly, as well as the anonymous reviewer for *Quest*.

² CEBs is derived from the Spanish *comunidades eclesiales de base*.

³ Mainwaring, 61.

⁴ Cleary, 5.

⁵ Henneberry, 2012, *passim*.

⁶ Cleary, 108.

⁷ Author’s interview with Reverend Stephen Judd, M.M., in Omaha, Nebraska, April 4, 2014.

teaching under the Leonine Encyclicals, which encompassed the pontificates of Leo XIII and his four successors, Pius X, Benedict XV, Pius XI, and Pius XII.⁸

Leo XIII (1878-1903) set the foundation for this movement in a variety of ways. He “had stressed his positive hope for the new social context, had given priority to an offensive diplomatic outreach to moderately liberal political elites, and had moderately supported the social struggle of the working class.”⁹ His greatest contribution was *Rerum novarum* (1891) and would be the foundation for Leo’s successors.

Although he differed in his tactics and attitude, Pius X (1903-14) shared the same goal as Leo XIII of resisting socialism and restoring Christian civilization within the new middle-class.¹⁰ Pius X “vigorously supported the turn to the laity for religious education, spiritual renewal, and Catholic Action, *albeit under strict hierarchical control.*”¹¹ This statement implies there is a movement for the laity to be recognized as actively participating in the Church. However, that comes under the stipulation that they are subject to strict hierarchical control. The Church was not yet at the point of letting the Church be *of* the people; the Church and the liturgical mass were still seen as the celebrant’s instead of being the *people’s* Church.

Pius X emphasized the significance of Catholic Action helping to address social issues. Although his encyclical *Il fermo proposito* (1905) was presented only to the bishops of Italy, it “mandated ‘Catholic Action’ associations, ‘promoted chiefly by lay Catholics,’ as the principal means to solve the ‘social question.’”¹² In the same encyclical, Pius X, “defined the object of Catholic Action as ‘the practical solution of the social question according to Christian principles.’”¹³ Therefore, without Catholic Action at the forefront of confronting social issues, Catholic social thought would have been undermined.

The works of Pius XI (1922-39), known as the Catholic Action Pope, made a substantial contribution to the movement of Catholic Action with his most famous encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), which were his reflections on Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum*. Holland states the following:

He [Pius XI] appealed through the clergy to ‘lay apostles of both workers and employers’ *for all to take up ‘an intensive study of the social question,’ to form ‘Christian organizations’ and ‘study groups guided by principles in harmony with the Faith,’ to promote ‘Workers’ Retreats,’ and for all to be united ‘under the leadership and guidance of the Church*’¹⁴

This call for “an intensive study of the social question” by forming “Christian organizations” was the initiation for CEBs, and it was because of this summons that CEBs were so well supported and flourished. In addition, the “study groups” were not founded on social change, but rather “in harmony with the Faith.” In short, this planted the seeds of CEBs within the Church.

⁸ The encyclical letters issued by Benedict XV (1914-22) were primarily focused on love, compassion, and world peace, so I will not concentrate on his encyclicals. For a detailed explanation of the encyclicals from the Leonine period, see Holland, 230-288.

⁹ Holland, 240.

¹⁰ Holland, 240. When this document references to socialism, it is referencing Marxism. At that point, there was no distinction between Marxism, socialism, and communism because it was all Marxism. As time progresses, these terms will separate from Marxism and hold different meanings.

¹¹ Holland, 240, emphasis mine.

¹² Holland, 233.

¹³ Holland, 234.

¹⁴ Holland, 267, emphasis mine.

Rainwater

The final pope of the Leonine period was Pius XII (1935-58). Although he issued no encyclical addressed solely to the social question, he did appeal to the laity.¹⁵ Before describing his views, it is critical to realize the historical context of his view of the laity.

The traditional image of the relationship between the church and the laity was the following: “the church as ‘mother’ with her lay ‘children’ as external to her.”¹⁶ From that image, the natural inference was that the clergy were seen as the ‘first and chief’ members, with the laity allowed only to ‘*collaborate with the hierarchy*.’¹⁷ Within that context, anything varying from this top-down hierarchal view of the church was novel. Therefore, when Pius XII spoke about “a growing role for the laity and a more adequate ecclesiology to support the laity’s role,” it was groundbreaking due to his continued attachment to the traditionalist view of the laity.¹⁸ Thus, although the popes involved in the Catholic Action movement generally held a traditional mentality toward the laity, the heart of the campaign was revolutionary. This was due to the fact that its experiment with greater lay participation was remembered as CEBs began to emerge.

Even though the papacy after the Leonine period chose to emphasize other areas in the Church, when the time came, people still recognized the direction the church had taken during this period. This allowed for people to openly embrace the call to the laity when it resurfaced again after Vatican II. The call for the laity officially articulated at Vatican II was the stepping-stone for including a greater involvement of the laity in CEBs. It introduced a new role of the laity as the People of God with the responsibility of building the Kingdom of God.

Vatican II and the People of God

Vatican II was a watershed moment in the history of the Church in which a new understanding of the Church made its way into Catholicism. This understanding occurred through the new image of the People of God. Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962, with the desire for *aggiornamento* in the Church, which roughly translates as “bringing up to date.” As the Church found itself distant from the modern world, it sought to take an active part in responding to massive changes in the world including those technological, political, and developmental challenges that had been slowly emerging over time.¹⁹ In order to do that, “the Council began with a deep reflection on what it meant to be a Church in and for the world.”²⁰ The contrast from prior to Vatican II can be illustrated by two encyclicals, *Mystici corporis Christi* (1943) and *Lumen gentium* (1963). In about twenty years, the image used by the Church to refer to both itself and the role of the laity completely changed, with a universal call to holiness being emphasized. In this, as in other areas, Vatican II effected revolutionary change.

While a full history of Vatican II is not possible here, the main teaching of the Second Vatican Council relevant to the current discussion is its different image of the community called the Church. The Council considered the Church first as a totality referred to as the “People of God.” The root of the image “People of God” emerges at the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew people become a people through their liberation in

¹⁵ Although no encyclical addressed it exclusively, Pius XII did include ample references to the social question in his encyclicals, and “regularly used radio to apply Catholic social teaching to technically specific areas.” Holland, 271.

¹⁶ Holland, 309.

¹⁷ Holland, 309, emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Holland, 287.

¹⁹ Kelly, 50.

²⁰ Kelly, 50-51.

the Exodus. “The result of this divine compassion is the liberation from slavery of what would become the People of God. This slavery was *not* just physical, but political, social and of course, spiritual.”²¹ Therefore, People of God can be defined as a *theological* (and not a sociological) understanding of a community introduced by Christ who has Christ as their head and their ultimate goal as the Kingdom of God, and not heaven.²² This requires further explanation. The Kingdom of God occurs when humanity arranges the social, political, and economic affairs of this world in a way that God would approve. Concretely this would mean that created goods exist for all, especially the poor. Instead of working for the glory of the Church, which was the view prior to Vatican II, people now work for the Kingdom of God, and in order for that to happen, the Church must be in service to the same. *Lumen gentium* states the following: “But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.”²³ Now the Church, which formally includes the laity, has a crucial role in relationship to serving of the Kingdom of God.

The new idea of the laity acknowledged during Vatican II and the experiment that Catholic Action and Catholic social thought provided as a precursor will be exercised in one avenue through CEBs working on the ground. The People of God, including the laity, now work for the Kingdom of God with faith as their basis.

Christian Base Communities in Latin America

Before discussing the nature of CEBs, it is necessary to set the scene with a succinct historical background of how they first began. “For twenty years, emphasis shifted in the Latin American church from joining traditional lay organizations to focusing energies and resources on grassroots Christian communities.”²⁴ Although it was not universal, the Medellín and Puebla conferences ignited this ideology and pastoral strategy.²⁵ The Medellín conference was called into session in order to put the teachings of Vatican II into practice for Latin America, while the Puebla conference strongly reaffirmed Medellín. One relevant, concrete suggestion that Medellín calls for is base communities being the solution “to establish a balance with minority groups, which are the groups in power.”²⁶ Through Christian base communities, the People of God is obliged to serve the least among them so that the downtrodden may become aware of their own rights and stand up for them. By fulfilling that, we become fully immersed in this world by serving the Kingdom of God. The “Kingdom” requires that *all* Christians work to improve the social, political, and economic affairs of this world in a way that God would approve.

Although we all have an obligation to serve the Kingdom of God, some people are better gifted at being leaders for a community of faith. However, the training of these leaders has not always been emphasized, as the Puebla conference noted:

But not enough attention has been paid to the training of leaders in faith education and Christian directors of intermediate organism in neighborhoods, the world of work, and the rural areas. Perhaps that is why

²¹ Kelly, 58.

²² Kelly, 59, emphasis mine.

²³ Pope Paul VI, *Lumen gentium*, (1964), no. 31.

²⁴ Cleary, 33.

²⁵ The Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) called for both of these conferences. In 1968, they gathered for the Second General Conference in Medellín, Colombia; in 1979, they assembled for the Third General Conference in Puebla, Mexico.

²⁶ Conference of Latin American Bishops, Medellín, Colombia, *Justice, Peace, Family and Demography Poverty of the Church* (1968), no. 20 (see works cited).

Rainwater

not a few members of certain communities, and even entire communities, have been drawn to purely lay institutions or have been turned into ideological radicals, and are now in the process of losing any authentic feel for the church.²⁷

Thus, even during the early development of CEBs, the Church was cognizant of the importance of training leaders. As we will discover, this issue was not just prevalent then, but is applicable today. While a spirit of support arose from these ecumenical councils, Christian base communities slowly appeared and expanded. This was partially due to the lack of written regulations CEBs could all follow to guide their establishment.²⁸ Because of this, most CEBs began as impromptu communities, and their methods would be deliberated on in hindsight.²⁹

Because of this lack of intentionality in establishing CEBs, every CEB is unique. The subsequent description will not give specifics about one CEB in particular, but rather an overarching theme of what CEBs are. Although it is difficult to give one definition of CEBs due to the variation among them all, Edward Cleary, O.P., offers an accurate and concise summary:

They resemble the small communities of the first centuries of Christianity. What they have in common is that they resemble living cells in an organism newly coming to life. Generally, twelve to twenty persons make up a community. They usually come together in their neighborhood or village once a week to read sacred scripture, pray together, and sing hymns and to reflect on what the scriptures mean in their daily lives. That reflection frequently leads them to a course of social action to improve the living conditions in their barrio.³⁰

Even though CEBs have been more prominent within the last fifty years, they, by their nature, are nothing novel. In the times of the first disciples, small communities would gather together in faith, usually in the homes of those in the group. Within this faith, there is a conviction of being a mediator of the Kingdom of God.³¹ The idea is that humans become like Christ in order to fulfill the Kingdom of God here on earth and not just strive for individual salvation.

There are a few distinctive features of CEBs, and while none of these characteristics is novel when addressed individually, taken together they result in a CEB. First, CEBs emphasize reading the Bible in light of the lived reality of those in a particular community. The Bible allows people to find the Word of God in their own reality.³² This leads the community to engage in social action to improve their lives. However, it is not enough merely to realize the social situation around one's community. There must be a movement originating from the marginalized to find an avenue for a solution to the social injustice.³³ This process is referred to as conscientization – empowering the marginalized and oppressed

²⁷ Hennelly, 249. This quote is from the *Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops* "Evangelization in Latin America's Present and Future" (Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, January 27-February 13, 1979), is particularly from the Puebla Final Document, "Base-Level Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), the Parish, and the Local Church."

²⁸ Libânio, 330.

²⁹ Libânio, 330.

³⁰ Cleary, 34.

³¹ Rhodes, 113.

³² Rhodes, 112.

³³ For more on conscientization see Freire or Jerez and Hernández-Picó.

by raising their consciousness of their own fatalism in order to motivate them to become agents of their own development.³⁴ It involves the entire community and not just the individual. Those who are conscientized first seek to understand their reality and then ask how it aligns with the will of God and what options for change are available. The impact of this “is that social reality is perceived as malleable and redeemable.”³⁵ Thus, in CEBs, the community grows in both unity and greater awareness that results in social action.

Experience is another characteristic of CEBs. There are two forms of experience: 1) interactions among people and their environment and 2) encounters that involve a cycle of action and interpretation.³⁶ In the latter, CEB members ask questions and take action against the social injustices they encounter in light of the message of their Church and society. “The quality of their engagement in praxis [defined here as interdependence of action and reflection] has boosted and apparently confirmed the hopefulness of their interpretive stance and their conviction about the possibility of transforming social reality.”³⁷ This is quite similar to the see-judge-act model that was introduced by Catholic Action.

CEBs also bring about a new relationship to the church in the form of an integrated relationship among the clergy and laity. Members of CEBs feel they belong to “an association ‘owned’ by its members.”³⁸ This sense of ownership is expressed by a notion of subjecthood, the next component of CEBs. In fact, “The emergence of the laity represented the greatest achievement of the Latin American church.”³⁹ One of the ways that occurred concretely was through CEBs since they gave the laity a chance to “own” a part of their church, the small basic community. The increased commitment of laity allowed the clergy to focus on issues within the parish besides parishioner participation.⁴⁰ Therefore, CEBs became a reviving movement for both clergy and laity.

A final dominant feature in CEBs is faith. If a person’s faith is integrated into who one is, one’s experience of oppression, and the possibility of working together to get out of it, then faith transforms into something that is integral as opposed to being a component of that person. Therefore, it becomes less of a way for personal salvation and more a commitment to communal salvation. Instead of only deepening one’s own spiritual life, one effects such deepening more broadly by walking with others in their faith journey.

Based upon the various features of CEBs, there are several benefits that arise from them. First, by participating in CEBs, people’s faith changed from an individual perspective to one centered on the community.⁴¹ In short, traditional Catholic belief regarded individual suffering to be a way to attain salvation; conversely, people in CEBs develop liberationist and communitarian beliefs that enable them in the struggle for justice.⁴² Therefore, CEBs are an important source for revival of one’s faith. Due to their more communitarian approach, CEBs stimulated spirituality by developing a sense of discipleship and challenging and encouraging other community members.⁴³ Second, through the unity created when the marginalized are conscientized, CEBs sustain the marginalized in times of struggle and

³⁴ Cleary, 112-113.

³⁵ Rhodes, 110.

³⁶ Rhodes, 112.

³⁷ Rhodes, 112.

³⁸ Rhodes, 35.

³⁹ Rhodes, 43.

⁴⁰ Cleary, 33.

⁴¹ Adriaance 1994, 176.

⁴² Adriaance 1994, 176.

⁴³ Cleary, 53-54.

Rainwater

persecution.⁴⁴ Third, CEBs contribute to the process of democratization by “providing resources and space for organization, collective action, and direct involvement in political struggles...and teaching and encouraging new values and practices that serve to question existing authoritarian elements of the political culture.”⁴⁵ Finally, CEBs are a way to influence the masses, for CEBs have been incorporated into the lives of around 20 to 30 million Catholics in Latin America, particularly in Brazil and Central America.⁴⁶ These merits imply how valuable a community with CEBs can be.

Less tangible benefits of CEBs are also apparent. For example, some members of CEBs attest to the strength and durability of their CEB by saying it will never falter because of work of the Holy Spirit at the foundation of each base community.⁴⁷ This is one of the reasons why respondents “seem optimistic about their durability and firm in the belief of their right to exist” despite some concern whether the Vatican supported CEBs.⁴⁸ Therefore, a base community is not just a community of people gathered together to combat social injustices in their community. More importantly, its members are united together by a shared suffering which, after reflection on the Bible, leads the people to action to change their living condition. Overarching this entire notion is the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the group. With the collaboration of God in each base community, the members realize that they themselves are not the reason why there is so much strength found in CEBs, but rather the Spirit working through them to foster change for the betterment of the whole community, the Kingdom of God on earth.

One of the positions commonly emphasized in CEBs is liberation theology. Although liberation theology was under pressure from Church hierarchy for its validity and truth, those days are over, and it is now regarded as not only an acceptable aspect of Catholicism, but also a necessary facet that needs to be emphasized in this day and age.⁴⁹ The best explanation for liberation theology is not a definition, but rather a question:

To state the question of a theology of liberation means, therefore, to ask about the meaning of this work on earth, the work that human beings perform in this world vis-à-vis the faith. In other words, what relationship is there between the construction of this world and salvation?⁵⁰

It is important to realize that the viewpoint of liberation theology does not overshadow the traditional views of the Catholic Church, but rather the notions of liberation theology are woven into the tradition. This can apply to priests, for example, by their encouragement of lay input and also emphasis on themes of social justice.⁵¹ In addition, the integration of liberation theology can be applied to traditional religious activities. For example, in Villa El Salvador, Peru, the parish community held a Marian procession in the evening from the church to a family’s house whose father was terminally ill. Among other things, the community united together to celebrate mass at his house. The parish community walked with someone who was suffering, and because of that action, the family felt a sense of hope, knowing that the community of faith was there to support him and his family.

⁴⁴ Adriance 1995, 381. For this common theme, see generally Adriance 1994.

⁴⁵ Cavendish, 186.

⁴⁶ Cleary, 53.

⁴⁷ Cleary, 298.

⁴⁸ Cleary, 298.

⁴⁹ Valente, last modified June 21, 2013.

⁵⁰ Hennelly, 249, quoting Gustavo Gutiérrez’s 1968 article, “Toward a Theology of Liberation.”

⁵¹ Adriance 1991, 300.

The Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Puebla, Mexico, held in 1979 recognized the value of CEBs as a facet of the Catholic Church:

In particular we have found that small communities, especially the CEBs, create more personal interrelations, acceptance of Gods' word, reexamination of one's life, and reflection on reality in the light of the gospel. They accentuate committed involvement in the family, one's work, and the neighborhood, and the local community. We are happy to single out the multiplication of small communities as an important ecclesial event that is peculiarly ours, and as the 'hope of the Church' (EN:58).⁵²

There is thus support from the hierarchy that CEBs are a useful instrument for the Church. With this in mind, the question becomes how a parish will implement these beneficial ideas.

With an overview of CEBs established, it is useful to briefly compare the features that distinguish parishes with and without CEBs. One of these is the "emphasis on Bible reading and discussion (over and above ritual experiences), and in many cases, their espousal of the ideas of liberation theology."⁵³ It can also be proposed that CEB leaders, including both clergy and laity, use more Church documents and discussions in order "to raise the awareness of CEB members to their political rights and duties as citizens. Recognizing the importance of participation, CEB members have, in turn, become more involved in a variety of community work projects..."⁵⁴ Moreover, through the CEBs, the members in turn increase their participation in political programs.⁵⁵

With a general understanding of the origin and nature of CEBs, it is possible to narrow the scope to CEBs in two urban slums in Lima, Peru, Villa El Salvador and El Agustino. Previous research suggests that CEBs normally arise when there is a shared suffering among a group of people united in their faith. Although that is an understated description of the situations in Villa El Salvador and El Agustino, one would speculate that these two urban slums would likely have established and flourishing CEBs that are a foundational aspect in the church. However, in these two barrios, there is a very different situation.

Situation in Villa El Salvador and El Agustino, Lima, Peru⁵⁶

Upon surveying the situation of CEBs in Villa El Salvador and El Agustino, the general trend now is the failure of CEBs to develop. There are two possible reasons why this is occurring. First, these are two densely populated barrios with overwhelming problems that are not shared by everyone. Second, the existence of foreign missionaries that fail to know how to teach the local people exactly what a CEB does. Although these reasons appear distinct, they do correlate as a whole, namely, to a lack of social Catholicism.

Villa El Salvador (hereinafter 'Villa') and El Agustino are densely populated urban barrios in Lima, Peru, with an increasing number of resources available to assist people's

⁵² Hennelly, 249, quoting the Puebla Final Document, "Base-Level Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), the Parish, and the Local Church."

⁵³ Cavendish, 181.

⁵⁴ Cavendish, 187.

⁵⁵ Cavendish, 188. See his "Empirical Studies" section (188-191) for the degree to which CEBs affect their members and the political culture.

⁵⁶ I was selected as a teacher assistant on a summer faculty-led-study-abroad program to Peru for six weeks through Creighton University. During that time, I conducted personal interviews with male and female foreign missionaries and a female member of a base community in the two parishes that our group did service, Villa El Salvador and El Agustino.

Rainwater

needs. This reason is two-fold. First, CEBs work best when people unify themselves to respond to *communal*, not individual problems. Due to the vast amount of people in Villa and El Agustino, everyone has a different problem. Other than their poverty, which is a general aspect of their lives, what would unite a people to work together? When the barrios were first being developed, everyone was working together to get their community established with roads and plumbing. However, once they got the bare minimum, it became more difficult to maintain that community or organization since their problems shifted to more individual ones. They may all be pressing domestic problems or success issues, but they are not galvanizing, where everyone has the same issue. In fact, a Jesuit priest in El Agustino stated that once a community attains its necessary needs, the aspect of community of faith starts to diminish as people become more self-focused and believe they do not need others for support.⁵⁷ In other words, CEBs in post-transition countries or communities “no longer appear to have a clearly focused agenda.”⁵⁸ Therefore, it appears that in order for a CEB to unite, there needs to be a struggle that is held in common by the community, which is hard to find in densely populated barrios such as Villa or El Agustino. Despite this possible explanation of why the CEBs are failing to develop, there still remains the question of what could unite a population that is so large. This leads one to wonder if there is no shared suffering or problem, is it possible to have a successful CEB?

A second explanation may be that as a barrio becomes more populated, the people in a CEB focus less on social Catholicism. This stems from two reasons. First, large cities have more organizations that can mobilize the poor than rural areas; therefore, church groups become lost amid all the other organizations that mobilize people. This correlation also occurred in Brazil: “Direct links between base communities and social activism are more in evidence in *rural* areas of the Amazon than in the urban center-south region.”⁵⁹ One may hypothesize that if the social or political role is already addressed by another organization, then CEBs will fail to develop as they were intended. In that scenario, it is not a failure of the church or faith. Rather, when there are political mechanisms in place, the development of a base community will not transpire. Second, as the population in the barrios increases, the diversity of the problems become so overwhelming that people cannot devote attention to social Catholicism. Instead, they focus on personal spiritual change. This was the case for the Peruvian leader of a base community: she emphasized personal spiritual change and personal problems with people rather than social Catholicism.⁶⁰

In Villa, there appeared to be a lack of an understanding of social Catholicism. The question, therefore, is the following: What are the people missing because they do not understand social Catholicism? One can speculate, but it is certainly possible that they end up privatizing the faith. It is important to note that the largest competing faith communities (i.e., Pentecostalism and Evangelical Catholics) share a similar message: listen to God in your heart, read the Bible, and be a good, moral person. Although this is a simplification, this models Evangelical Christianity. One of the strategies the pastor of Villa is implementing to keep the retention of the faithful at his Church is by imitating aspects of the Evangelicals, such as studying the Bible and focusing on the Spirit, at the cost of straying from practicing social Catholicism. Because of this, members of the parish are not being conscientized in terms of anything more than personal spiritual conversion disconnected from their own

⁵⁷ Author’s interview with Reverend Matt Garr, S.J., in El Agustino, Peru, June 17, 2014.

⁵⁸ Cavendish, 192.

⁵⁹ Adriaance 1995, 381, emphasis mine.

⁶⁰ Author’s interview with Ilaria Osmalio in Villa El Salvador, Peru, June 27, 2014.

context. Until they begin to address, for example, the reason why Villa is marginalized (racism and classism in Peru) or some of the structural problems (lack of infrastructure and health care) before people acquire jobs and opportunities, the community will not integrally develop. Although work on personal holiness is very important, there must be a communal dimension to how the People of God work for the Kingdom of God.

In addition to trying to grasp *what* the people are missing due to their lack of understanding social Catholicism, it is just as important to figure out *who* is responsible for this gap in the teaching. This leads to the second possible reason why CEBs are failing to develop in Villa El Salvador and El Agustino: the existence of foreign missionaries that fail to teach the local people exactly what a CEB does. Foreign missionaries became prevalent in both Villa and El Agustino in the 1970s and 1980s, and that continues through today. All of the religious members interviewed in both these areas were foreign missionaries. “In the sixties, when the influx of Americans to Latin America reached its apex, nearly 68 percent of all American diocesan priests in Latin America were in Peru.”⁶¹ Foreign missionaries arrived believing they could contribute to the economic and social development of Latin America.⁶²

However, the present generation of foreign missionaries does not share that social mission in the same way. For example, the Catholic pastor in Villa lacked an acquaintance with what CEBs were, and recommended speaking to the nun in his parish who oversees the CEBs. When asked what CEBs are, this nun stated, “[Members of CEBs] reflect on their lives and look at the situation they’re living in light of the Gospel and then try to do something about it. It is not just meeting and reflecting, they’re also trying to do something about it, their situation. [Q: The aspect of social analysis?] Yes.”⁶³

However, when a lay leader of a Christian base community was asked what a CEB is, she described something similar to a faith group. Furthermore, when asked about social analysis in her group, she did not dwell on that for long, focusing her attention on discussing the importance of the Holy Spirit in their group, *personal* spiritual change, and *personal* problems with people.⁶⁴ Therefore, the main overseer of the Christian base communities appears to have a comprehensive understanding of what a CEB is. However, the leader of one of the CEBs does not seem to grasp one of the crucial elements of a base community, namely, social Catholicism in regard to the whole community, and not just personal spiritual and physical problems with people or families.

The Villa pastor’s lack of knowledge of what CEBs are mirrors the Puebla Final Document’s concern about the lack of attention given to the formation and training of leaders in relation to CEBs. Despite his lack of knowledge about CEBs, he has, however, taken on social justice and the option for the poor, which are steps in the right direction. On the other hand, the religious sister, who is a foreign missionary from Ireland, has had vast experience with CEBs based on her previous experience with them in Chile. Therefore, the question becomes how leaders can be trained so they *all* possess the same understanding of the Church life in the district where they will be stationed so that they do not hinder a parish’s social faith development.

The reasons listed for why CEBs have failed to develop in Villa and El Agustino do not do justice to the complexity of the situation. However, they hopefully are sparks that will ignite the conversation among the people to make CEBs flourish as they once did. Another

⁶¹ Klaiber, 264.

⁶² Klaiber, 264.

⁶³ Author’s interview with Sister Maeve O’Driscoll in Villa El Salvador, Peru, June 25, 2014.

⁶⁴ Author’s interview with Ilaria Iladia Osmalio in Villa El Salvador, Peru, June 27, 2014.

Rainwater

dimension of this issue is how it is possible to reunite the people of faith as they were when they initially established their community and experienced a shared suffering. In addition, an area of further research is whether the migration of people into the cities is dissolving the possibility of having meaningful base communities. All of these questions are necessary, although more research would be needed to come to a fuller understanding of why and how CEBs are failing to develop in Villa and El Agustino.

Despite the failure of CEBs to develop in Villa and El Agustino, CEBs are relevant to North America. CEBs, although more prevalent in Latin America, still can contribute lessons for North America as well as effective features in the parish.

Lessons for North America

Although the issue is multifaceted, one possible explanation for why CEBs do not have as much presence in North America as in Latin America is the issue that the Final Document of Puebla addressed – the lack of attention given to training leaders within the parish.

Base communities could be effective in parts of North America in a variety of ways. First, these “living cells” of the Church could help build community. This sense of community differs from community formed in other groups because of the incorporation of reflection on the Bible that leads to social action. In addition, CEBs allow the laity to own their participation in the Church. By giving this sense of ownership, the laity will not only become more involved with the parish, but will see it as an integral part of their lives. Finally, CEBs could offer North American Christianity a form of social Catholicism using the see-judge-act method of Catholic Action. As most scholars agree, Catholic social thought is not on the radar of a typical North American Catholic – perhaps the lack of small community organizations like CEBs is one reason why.

One can speculate, but it is certainly possible that base communities could be quite effective in parts of North America, especially where there are small towns with serious problems. Although CEBs may not function well in large, populated cities, it does not mean that the model is irrelevant. Possible places where a base community might function are on an Indian reservation or areas that are impoverished, such as immigrant communities where people work in large factories.

According to J.B. Libânio, the factors that facilitated the ecclesiological explosion of CEBs, namely, increased lay involvement and a development of a more communal lifestyle, would only have created a revised church that lacked social Catholicism, which is the case for many Catholic parishes in North America.⁶⁵ However, the tipping point that led to the vast expansion of CEBs in South America was the addition of a political ingredient: a repressive regime.⁶⁶ Moreover, “with the transitions to democracy, many CEB leaders feel that the movement has lost one of its defining characteristics: a space for organizing against the military regime.”⁶⁷ This “essential” element raises the question whether CEBs do not flourish in North America because a repressive regime or an outside organization has to be present to give CEBs focus through combatting a common enemy.

Perhaps a shared suffering is what is lacking in a lot of middle-class communities, as most people do not have problems related to basic survival. Therefore, it is really a question of convenience and not survival. This brings about the following question: Are certain

⁶⁵ Libânio, 319-324, especially 324.

⁶⁶ Libânio, 324.

⁶⁷ Cavendish, 192.

economic and political conditions necessary to birth meaningful base communities? Without that context, there might be the possibility of slowly becoming a Christian Life Community or a Bible study group, which has a personal and interpersonal understanding of the faith, but not a social one.

Although a shared experience of suffering seems a necessary component of CEBs, it is important to realize that CEBs are not solely established on that. As Stephen Rhodes declares, “if human experience is given a superior or equal weight in relation to such revelation [of the Scriptures], then from the standpoint of traditional Christianity, one risks supplanting divine revelation by human wisdom and divine action by human action.”⁶⁸ Human experiences add a useful component to CEBs, but members’ own shared experiences cannot take precedence over the liberating Word of God and Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the common experience that does comprise a form of suffering or oppression should be handled vigilantly. It does not have to be a necessary component of the experience, but can also be perceived as “a malleable set of conditions calling for transformation.”⁷⁰

Some researchers believe CEBs have “begun to prove the old juridical and classical model of the church is no longer useful.”⁷¹ Libânio states that there are two differences between the old model and the new one. Instead of viewing the Church as “organization and divine right,” it has shifted to “the presence of the resurrected Christ, and his spirit in humanity, and in particular the church.”⁷² Second, the Church is not fixed; it encompasses a variety of ministries that bring about a sense of unity with the faithful.⁷³ Therefore the Church may be heading toward a model and attitude that is in support of CEBs. As more research is done, it will further assist communities so we can all walk in the journey of faith together.

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⁶⁸ Rhodes, 113.

⁶⁹ Rhodes, 114.

⁷⁰ Rhodes, 114.

⁷¹ Libânio, 327.

⁷² Libânio, 327.

⁷³ Libânio, 327.

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