

---

## From the vision of Aparecida to the 2021 Ecclesial Assembly. Msgr. Cabrejos: "An inverted pyramid, which begins and ends with the people of God"

"It will be the Assembly of the 'inverted pyramid', it all starts and ends with the people of God." Msgr. **Miguel Cabrejos**, president of the Latin American Episcopal Council, archbishop of Trujillo (Peru), uses this metaphor to illustrate to SIR the participatory and synodal rationale underlying the Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean, scheduled to take place in Mexico City from November 21 to 28. *It's the most important ecclesial event for the Church of the continent since the Aparecida Conference, and probably also the first major ecclesial event of the Covid era, in a continent that is arguably the hardest hit by the pandemic.* The numbers are huge: almost a thousand people: 200 bishops, 200 priests and deacons, 200 men and women religious, 400 lay faithful and women from various sectors, including people struggling on the margins of society. The majority will be attending the meeting remotely while approximately 50 participants will be physically present at the headquarters of the Mexican Bishops' Conference. *Preparations for the event lasted several months and consisted of an extensive consultation process conducted in various countries and dioceses.* "Some 70,000 people took part and the outcome was a 220-page volume", said Msgr. Cabrejos, interviewed by SIR on the occasion of the recent visit to the Vatican by the [CELAM](#) presidency, together with the first Vice-President, Cardinal **Odilo Scherer**, Archbishop of São Paulo (Brazil) and the Secretary General, Msgr. **Jorge Eduardo Lozano**, Archbishop of San Juan de Cuyo (Argentina). **The legacy of the Aparecida Conference and the Pope's vision.** The Assembly is connected to the Fifth General Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Aparecida in 2006. The CELAM President remarks: "At the CELAM elective assembly the new presidency was given a mandate to plan a sixth General Conference." The time seemed ripe, not least considering the period of time elapsed between the two previous conferences (Rio de Janeiro 1955, Medellín 1968, Puebla 1979, Santo Domingo 1992 and finally Aparecida 2006). *"However, when I discussed it with Pope Francis, he pointed out that many of the insights of Aparecida had not yet been fully developed and put into practice. That's when the idea of the Ecclesial Assembly came about."* The Secretary General, Msgr. Lozano, confirms: "The Pope has high hopes for this event, which is a practical expression of synodality. We must let the winds of the Holy Spirit blow and trust in the People of God. When I served as auxiliary bishop in Buenos Aires, a parish priest asked Archbishop Bergoglio for a criterion to understand whether he was a good parish priest. The Pope-to-be replied: 'When the parish is beyond your control.' I think the same applies to us bishops." Cardinal Scherer adds: *"The Assembly involves all the members of the Church, we perceive a new development unfolding. Participation in the listening phase in Brazil was widespread and extremely positive."* **For incarnate faith.** Moreover, it is by no means a stand-alone event. In fact it follows the Amazon Synod that took place two years ago, which was also marked by extensive involvement of the local Churches; and it comes a few months after the CELAM renewal process was put into practice. Furthermore, it coincides with the launch of the Synod on synodality convened by the Pope. Msgr. Cabrejos goes on to say, "The priority is to walk together as People of God, to deepen and give concrete form to collegiality. *I am sure that the wind of the Holy Spirit is blowing. I could see this when I breathed in the harmonious atmosphere surrounding the renewal of CELAM.* Another important aspect that emerged from the consultation process is the need for an incarnate faith. This was also highlighted by the extensive preparatory process. If not, it becomes immaterial. *Our Church is a legacy of the Medellín Conference, which incorporates the tenets of the Second Vatican Council and emphasises the preferential option for the poor.* The theme of the common home has been included over the past few years." Indeed, the notion of faith lived in the flesh is very much present in the rich and comprehensive 220 pages resulting from the listening process. Issues of an ecclesial nature recur (ranging from the role of the laity to new ministries, from urban pastoral care to the "challenge" posed

---

by the growth of neo-Evangelical movements), along with many questions relating to the social and economic spheres, starting with unacceptable poverty rates (especially in a continent home to the largest number of Catholics worldwide), violence, inequality, exploitation of natural resources, crime and drug trafficking. *The primarily virtual format of the event also deserves a mention, at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic, which has hit Latin America so hard, is still far from having been overcome.* The President of CELAM said: "Our activities have continued unabated over the past two years. We held 200 meetings in preparation for the Assembly (which was delayed by a year, *ed.'s note*). Some criticism was voiced, but the other option was to stop altogether and offer no hope. Given this situation, the listening process was a great gift of the Holy Spirit." **"The Wind of the Holy Spirit blows slowly."** In this hopeful perspective, it is fair to ask which aspects of the Aparecida Conference, in which Cardinal Bergoglio played a key role, still remain "unfinished" after 15 years. Cardinal Scherer, who took part in that meeting as archbishop of São Paulo, replied: "It was an extraordinary event, I remember it well, and the same applies to the final document. The Assembly decided to shelve the pre-existing draft of the final document. It was all rewritten, starting from the dynamic of being both disciples of the Lord and missionaries. Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed the key notion that Christian life does not start with some grand idea, but with the encounter with the person of Jesus. *We continue being asked for a pastoral conversion, to depart from a self-referential Church.* Aparecida placed great emphasis on missionary efforts and on Church-world relationship. Another theme that remains fundamental is that of Christian formation, a tremendous challenge." *The initiatives that resulted from Aparecida include a Continental Mission, initiated but without significant results.* "The risk was to see it as an event, not as an evangelising process. We are being called to undertake an integral and simultaneously pastoral conversion, and we must remember that these processes take time, the wind of the Spirit blows slowly", concludes CELAM president Msgr. Cabrejos. *\*Journalist, "La voce del popolo"*

Bruno Desidera\*