

ELEVEN YEARS OF CEHILA'S WORK

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CEHILA is an international commission whose aim is to study Latin American Church History from the point of view of the poor people. This commission of the History of the Church in Latin America is juridically autonomous, academically free commission. The commitments it makes are undertaken freely and as a service to the truth, to the people, and to the poor.

This means that:

First, CEHILA is an academic and scientific commission. It has a scientific task: To reconstitute the life of the church in accordance to historical method.

Second, its theological task includes the reconstruction of historical facts and their interpretation in the light of faith.

Third, it is also a consciousness-raising task because CEHILA has a dedicated team, which is committed to social change focused on the perspective of the poor and oppressed people. All these poor women and men have been the great majority in our countries, yet their needs, interests and history have always been forgotten by those who have possessed power, including the power of knowledge. The starting point in this method of making history is that history is usually written by conquerors and not by the conquered. Such is the case in Latin America, where the oppressed, the poor and those people whose human dignity and rights have in many instances been trampled upon, have also been denied the privilege of telling their own story. CEHILA is critical of such institutions that have denied the poor the privilege of determining their own destiny.

CEHILA has been working as a Latin American team since its foundation in Quito, Ecuador in 1973 by the initiative of Enrique Dusse.

It includes experts in disciplines other than history and fosters a dialogue of disciplinary integration. The initial CEHILA team, during the meetings at Quito (1973), Chiapas (1974), Santo Domingo (1975) and Panama (1976), fixed the CEHILA's criteria. This criteria has guided the works of the authors of the first CEHILA project: to write and publish a new history of the church in Latin America. This history will eventually grow to a collection of twelve or more volumes. (These books are part of the collection in three languages: Spanish, Portuguese, and English.) Even if the criteria defined by CEHILA has guided the works of the different authors, they have worked in a tolerant manner toward different opinions which are evident in the writings that are brought together in the different volumes. This general history of the Church in Latin America is a work that has its limitations. It is an open quarry in the rock of Latin American reality from which we have presently removed only a few stones. No one is as aware of the need for improvements in CEHILA's work as are the authors of the historical collection.

CEHILA's project is being carried out in an ecumenical spirit with the participation of Catholics and Protestants. Because everyone knows and understands their own reality and the sources are easier to consult, we Catholics research our church history and the Protestants research their church history.

Because all of the ecclesial realities of Latin America will be taken into account without regard to language, cultural or racial diversity of the regions that are studied, the presence of the Church among Latin Americans in the United States is also included.

Later we discovered that studying colonial church history in Latin America has led us to study other Third World church histories. Those histories include the presence of the Philippines, Angola, Mozambique and

Goa (Portuguese India). They are at the same point of history that there is linkage between Latin American Church Latin American Church and other Third World Churches. Hispanics in the US are in the same situation; they are the privileged participants in a dialogue between us and the Catholic Church in the United States. We know that CEHILA is one of the few institutions that allows this possibility to work as a team and have a realistic network.

This work is not intended only for historians, but rather for all contemporary Christians with a faith commitment to the church: laymen, laywomen, students, teachers, managers, farmers, workers, priests, pastors and members of religious orders and congregations. In short, for all who are concerned about the life of the churches, especially the poorest of our communities. For this reason CEHILA has developed several different projects during its eleven years of continuous work.

We have twelve projects. They are intended for different levels: scholars, students, pastoral agents and the Populare level (peasant, working class, eclespal popular communities). For the last two levels all projects are working in conjunction with a pastoral organization.

Let me share some examples:

On the scholarly level we have a project about the History of Theology in Latin America, or a project on how to keep and to recuperate religious archives.

For the students, pastoral agents, religious, priests, and the general public, we have the Historia Minima. It is to write each National Church History in a 120 to 150 pages so that it can be published in a pocket edition, another is the edition of a Manual of Latin American Church history that is a cooperative effort with the Confederation Interamericana de Educacion

Catolica. (CIEC)

Our most important projects are the ones developed for popular sectors. The tasks of these projects are to explain the church history through the popular media such as songs, popular poetry, oral tradition, etc. The special task that historians have is to service the voiceless poor, that is to provide the poor a voice with which they can speak. We experiment in different ways to reach the poor. We have also put out different publications and workshops in very poor communities.

Every project gives special attention to the poor women throughout our church history. This is not a special project but a conscious decision that affects all CEHILA's projects. Importance must be given to the women's role in history. We do not study their role in separate projects because history has been created by women and men together. In a Cehila meeting in San Antonio, Texas in 1983, we recognized the role of women as equally important as the study of poor. Thus, we must include in our history the perspective of poor women and men.

As you can imagine this project has its difficulties because:

1) The majority of these forgotten and silent people are illiterate and they can not develop history from their existence. The archives have always been the archives of the powerful and all we know about the poor has been through the testimony of the powerful or their institutions. These powerful are a minority – rich, white, literate landowners who use their instruments of politics, economics, and social and cultural domination to control the majority. This presents several methodological problems in locating the necessary historical sources and working with them.

2) There is an absence of historians for this task. We need historians who have good academic records and are also committed to this perspective.

Today we are historians trained in the best European and American Universities. But this is not enough and so CEHILA promoters organized national and international courses, conferences and workshops in order to prepare the new generation with methodologies that are in line with the purpose of this commission.

3) Our purpose is to establish a permanent relationship with the church, "to be organic." All of our project is related to the Church's institutions. But this militant history, as scientific and critical as it is, has not been readily accepted by all of the Church's leadership. Also some political regimes are not in agreement with this work.

4) Continued difficulties have arisen in dealing with some traditional scholars in Latin America. They are very comfortable with their social and academic situation and do not like organic work which commits them to the poor, even if their work involves subjects such as peasants, labor movements, women, and the working class. This subject is sold wholeheartedly in North American and European foundations, even if the result of such research will never benefit the people.

A non-organic study serves only for the greater prestige of the Third World scholars and it does not help the national and international struggles to build a new and better social order.

Often times much of the resources used in the Third World are wasted in these kinds of projects that only help an elite scholarly group. We do not have many resources in the Catholic Church and we must be very careful.

These difficulties don't prevent us from seeing the coming challenges:

† We need a new framework for the study of our reality to clarify theoretical concepts, especially as they relate our reality. The social

sciences in which we work have been developed here and in Europe according to a specific historical development. These categories and concepts have emerged from this reality. Even if in general the methodologies and general theories of social sciences can be used in Latin America to understand our reality, we need to work for the future upon a base of a theoretical framework in order to achieve greater coherence and to deepen the riches of our reality. A homogeneous school of church historians in the Third World with similar critical methodologies have not yet evolved, but we would like to sponsor such a development.

Because history has always been the history of the literate and the powerful, our people in the Third world are people without a history written from their perspective. In the Church, we suffer from the same situation of voicelessness. We need a new epistemology to make our church history not only a national church history, but a universal church history. It is imperative to form one Universal Church history that pays attention to the perspective of Third World people. Traditionally we have had European white Church History as the universal church History.

To deny the poor their history or to impose upon them the point of view of the powerful is another type of domination. Because to trample upon a people's identity as a nation, means to deny them of all their possibility of human liberation.

The Church must have a prophetic voice to give a voice of the voiceless in the world. A new type of relationship must begin among all the nation's churches to create a new historical comprehension of the history of our faith in all the world. That is a challenge, not only for CEHILA and the Third World churches but, for all Christians interested in building the Kingdom of God.

Even if the project is difficult it is beautiful because:

1) The CEHILA works are realized through a scientific spirit of Christianity and poverty. If one considers the limited resources and the spirit of christian poverty of the authors who carry out this task without remuneration. This does not limit the team's growth in number of authors or in the qualities of the work during these last eleven years.

2) This history is not only from the point of view of the oppressed but also their point of view in their quest for Liberation.

History in this light concentrates on victories and defeats of a people seeking to be full human beings

3) History can be a powerful tool in the clarification of a people's identity and in the unification of its various components.

4) At a time when Latin America and the Third World is becoming concious of its existence as a culture dominated by others, a culture whose people are suffering from historical injustice, the church is slowly asuming its responsibility before history. Through this work we wish to recount the life of the Church, recalling both gestures in favor of the poor, and past acts of complicity with the powerful. We will exalt the church's merits without hiding its sins. We wish to be critical and not apologetic.

Our work is beautiful because it may help in the immense task of illuminating the valiant effort of our people to achieve their historical and eschatological Liberation. I just wanted to share this experience with you.