

≡≡≡ **BASIC** ≡≡≡
ECCLESIAL
COMMUNITIES

≡≡≡ **IN BRAZIL** ≡≡≡
The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church

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Foreword to the English Edition

The basic Christian communities are certainly the most promising sign of new vigor and spirit in the Church. For centuries it has been clearly and painfully evident that, while life always structures itself, structures do not beget life. The Church necessarily becomes a complex institution in the course of the centuries, but the institution of itself does not guarantee a living Church. For too long we have regarded the structures as the divine element in the Church as opposed to what people do in those structures, which is seen as the human element. The distinction is incorrectly drawn. The source, the inspiration, the life and faith, hope and love of the Church are the divine element rescuing, enhancing and transforming human freedom. The organizational structures that are set up from time to time are a typically human activity intended to support and express the divine life of grace that quickens the community. Like any structures, they are set up because they are seen as necessary and useful, but like any structures, they can become rigid and unresponsive to changing needs. It is not the structures that are able to heal themselves, but the people, living in grace, who are able to adapt them.

In the basic Christian communities we see the Church truly alive. We are brought back to the fervor of the beginnings. Not surprisingly, this has happened especially among the poor and oppressed, and among the less wealthy and powerful nations. In this also, we are brought back to the conditions of the beginnings. In such communities there is an element of counter-culture, an element of challenge. There is a fresh and vigorous appropriation of the gospel, a willingness to see its paradoxes and its pervasive exigence, a willingness to abandon private interests for the common good and the common purpose.

There is much that the churches of the wealthier and more powerful nations have to learn from these communities and

from the theological reflection that arises from their experiences of living the faith with conviction and great hope. Yet the message they have for us has been heard very little and very reluctantly in the English speaking countries. Among Christians in general and even among theologians there has been a tendency to see the basic ecclesial communities of the Third World more as a threat than a promise, more as an attack on the Church than a fuller realization of it. We need to have the phenomenon described to us in ways we can understand, and we need to have it explained theologically by an interpreter who knows these Third World communities in depth, but who also knows us with our hesitations and misgivings and objections. Such a one is Marcelo Azevedo when he discusses the basic ecclesial communities of Brazil in their historical and cultural context, their activities and their ecclesiological significance. We are much indebted to Father Azevedo and to his translator, John Drury, for making this text available to us in English with such thoroughness and clarity. It is a book that ought to transform our own awareness of what it is to be Church, and what it demands of us in the contemporary world.

Monika Hellwig

Introduction

In Brazil today, Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) are an ecclesiological component of major importance from the theological, pastoral, and institutional standpoints.¹ *Theologically*, they explicate biblical elements and aspects of the Church's tradition and doctrine, revealing their value in a new light. *Pastorally*, they create and facilitate a process of evangelization, and of growth in faith and the Christian life, that answers the needs of the majority of the nation's population. *Institutionally*, they represent a paradigm of ecclesial organization that is quite distinct from pre-existing models and that is having an ever increasing impact on the whole institutional life of the Church in Brazil. Thus BECs are a key element in the ecclesial life of the country, and in any attempt to understand it at this point in time. A rounded analysis of the basic elements underlying their present-day reality and their theoretical treatment, as well as an effort to look at their future development and its associated problems, may surely be a valuable service for the whole Church in terms of all three aspects noted above.

I. BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES AS A TOPIC TODAY

Today we find an enormous number of books, monographs, articles, and other studies on Basic Ecclesial Communities: in the Church in general, in Latin America, and in Brazil.² Many of these publications are analytical and departmental, focusing on specific aspects and documenting them with concrete examples of the BECs studied by the authors. Some works focus on well-defined dimensions of the BECs, be they theological, ecclesiological, or pastoral, in order to spell them out more clearly and perhaps offer some justification for them. Some essays deal with major events associated with BECs. Here I would include everything that has been written about the five

Interecclesial Meetings of BECs that have taken place. They certainly constitute a valuable stratum of information, but they are not the only vein to be tapped in trying to grasp the growing presence and activity of BECs in the Brazilian Church.³ We also have the research papers and documents emanating from the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) on the national or regional level, or from institutes and organisms associated with it and under its direct or indirect initiative.⁴ These publications are important for a proper evaluation of the committed involvement of the church hierarchy with BECs and its ongoing solicitude for them. There is also much mimeographed material: reports, bulletins, communiqués, and flyers designed to offer incentives, motivation, and promotion. Many of these mimeographed productions have served as the basis for discussions in seminars, conferences, and symposia. One of their main uses has been at the various Interecclesial Meetings of BECs. Some of them have been collected and published later in issues of SEDOC for documentary reference and the record.⁵ The tenor and quality of these materials vary greatly, so they must be used judiciously by researchers; but their hermeneutic value cannot be doubted. They serve as a living backdrop, woven in the spontaneous interaction of day-to-day activity and in the heat of problems perceived and faced in the real-life course of our BECs. They can help us to find our bearings and to evaluate the more elaborate studies that have been published.

If we want to classify the vast production of materials on BECs, I think we would do well to group them in *three* major categories:

1. Studies that focus on the existing *realities* of various BECs in an episodic and synchronic way, offering what might well be called a descriptive *phenomenology* of them.
2. Studies that record *procedures* and *methods* based on real-life experiences or the application of operative principles. They elucidate the *methodology* of BECs.
3. Published and nonpublished studies, more or less specialized, which deal with the *theological basis and justification* of BECs. While remaining closely linked to the concrete reality of BECs, these studies are marked by thematic reflection on the level of basic principles or in the light of

basic sources. Thus they are contributions to a *theology* of BECs under many different aspects, and they themselves are part of the elaboration of such a theology.

By combining the first and second categories, one should be able to come up with several major *typologies* of Brazilian BECs that are firmly grounded in the widely diversified reality of the country. In principle, any analytical study of BECs that was thoroughly rigorous and worked out to the last detail should bear such typologies in mind, since they both manifest and condition the methodology and functionality of BECs, hence their external physiognomy and behavior as well. I do not propose to deal with that level of specification here. My study falls under the third category indicated above. It focuses on the *theology of BECs*, with a strong emphasis on the *missiological* issue of *evangelization*. But there would be little validity to my reflections, it seems to me, if I did not take into account, at least implicitly, the following typologies of a more general or encompassing nature:

1. BECs in *rural areas*, primarily caught up in land problems and the resultant violence (Marabá, S. Félix do Araguaia, Juazeiro da Bahia, and various BECs in south-central Maranhão).

2. BECs in *rural areas* or *small and medium-sized settlements*, with problems of subsistence and/or climate, and institutional absence or neglect with regard to such basic necessities as sanitation, work, housing, education, and health (a pervasive problem in Brazil, and particularly acute for most of the BECs in the Northeast, Bahia, Acre, and the Amazon Basin).

3. BECs in areas strongly affected by so-called *major projects* (hydroelectric works, agribusiness, irrigation, roads, mineral exploration and metallurgy), or by the sordid *politics of bossism (coronelismo)* that pervades public life and compromises the allocation of human and material resources (Sul do Pará, Maranhão, São Francisco region of Bahia, a good portion of the Northeast).

4. BECs in the *metropolitan peripheries*, with problems of an industrial nature (work and wages), lodging (invasions), and lack of basic facilities connected with urbani-