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'Populus Dei' in Populo Pauperum: From Vatican II to Medellín and Puebla

THE QUESTION of the 'popular church' (*iglesia popular*) as a theological issue in need of clarification is immensely complex and cannot be given a quick explanation, as many critics have tried to do. I have to point out right from the beginning that part of the difficulty derives from the ambiguity, not just of the multi-faceted category 'people' (*pueblo*) but also of its various uses. 'People' may refer to the first people (Israel) or the new people (the Church); it may refer to the Gentiles (non-Christian) or a 'Christian people' (as in the Christian tradition of Latin America or Poland). John XXIII's expression 'the church of the poor', taken up in *Laborem Exercens* 8, may be an exact synonym of 'the popular church' if by 'popular' is meant the 'poor' of a Christian people. If, on the other hand, as we shall see, 'people' is taken as *gentes* (Gentiles), and it is said that 'The church is born solely of the people', the result is a sort of Pelagianism. Obviously to say, as has been said, that 'The church is born solely of the Holy Spirit,' is in turn a sort of monophytism.

On the other hand, if by 'church' are meant those Christians, part of the one official and institutional Church, who are being renewed, and evangelised, who make a choice for the poor, the oppressed and live among them, then this renewed 'church' (not a *new* church) can 'be born of the people' (from among the poor and oppressed, who in Latin America are already Christian, baptised and believers) through the action of the holy Spirit (which the theology of liberation has never denied). This is what is meant by Medellín, by Puebla, by the Christians who 'make the option' and live among the poor. It is absurd to say that the theology of liberation is the inspiration behind the popular church (in the sense indicated). The situation is precisely the opposite.

1. 'POPULUS DEI' AT VATICAN II (1962-1965)

If we take a historical perspective, no-one would have thought in 1965 that Chapter II of the constitution *De Ecclesia* would be the one we would be discussing, but Chapter III, on the bishops, which then appeared to be the central issue to put the definitions of Vatican I into their proper context.

The first schema 'De Ecclesia', presented on 1 December 1962, had a first chapter on 'the militant nature of the church' and a second on 'members of the church'.¹ Cardinal Liénart, in a speech which became famous, rejected the schema because only the juridical

aspect was discussed (*mere iuridico appareat*),² and not the Church as mystery, the 'mystical' aspect (*in natura sua mystica*),³ and ended with the ringing declaration, 'I love Plato, but I love truth more.' No less a person than Cardinal Koenig argued that the attribute of '*indefectibilitas fidei*' belonged to the 'believing people as a whole' (*populo credentium*),⁴ since the faithful not only received doctrine, but also, 'as a community of believers' (*communitas fidelium*), had a positive influence on the *magisterium*. Mgr Devoto of Goya, Argentine, said that there was 'also a need for a clear and explicit restatement of the idea of the whole *people of God* ... as the beginning of the whole constitution *De Ecclesia*.'⁵ Cardinal Hengsbach too favoured the rejection of the schema for its 'clericalism and legalism' (*clericalismi et iuridismi*).⁶ In the end the schema was rejected.

A theological commission worked to prepare the new schema, which was presented in Congregation 37 (30 November 1963). Fr Chenu tells how a Polish cardinal pressed for the doctrine of the '*societas perfecta*', but the commission preferred the more biblical and spiritual idea of the '*people of God*'.⁷

The question of the '*people of God*' had already made its appearance in other conciliar schemas, as had that of the poor, the 'hungry multitudes'⁸ who 'demand social justice'.⁹ In the event, in the new schema 'The mystery of the Church',¹⁰ was followed by the question of the episcopate and only in Chapter III that of 'The People of God and in particular about the laity'.¹¹ Immediately an important debate began. Does 'the people of God' mean the laity or the whole Church? If it is the whole Church, it should come in Chapter II and the bishops in Chapter III. Cardinal Frings, for the Germans, proposed that Chapter II be devoted to the question 'Of the people of God'.¹² There was a change of meaning: from being only the laity, 'people of God' was transformed into a synonym for the Church. Some Latin Americans even then connected the issue of the '*people of God*' with 'a greater apostolic dedication to the evangelisation of the poor'.¹³ In Congregation 54, on 23 October, Mgr Manuel Larrain spoke about the *Populus Dei*, emphasising its role of prophecy and martyrdom (witness), not 'passive acceptance', but active participation.¹⁴

Finally, in Congregation 80, on 15 November 1964, the 'corrected text' of Chapter II, '*De populo Dei*', was presented.¹⁵ With minor changes, this was to be the final text of *Lumen Gentium*. The opening statement, 'Christ is the light of all nations,' (LG 1), brings us right to the issue: *gentium* is not the same as *populorum*. But the terms used all refer to groups, communities, societies:

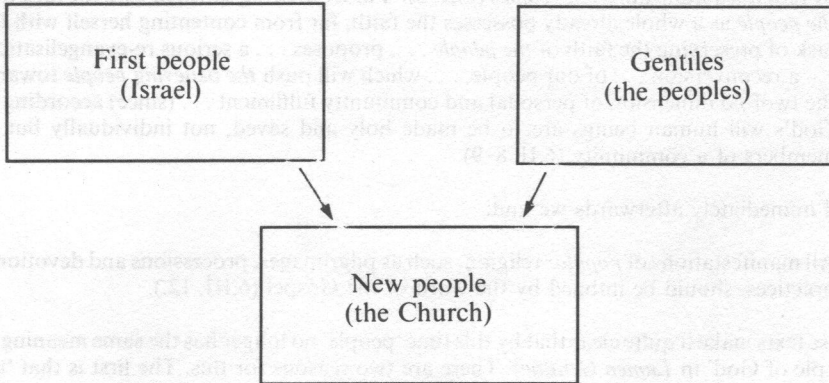
It has pleased God, however, to make men holy and save them, not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single *people* ... He therefore chose the race of Israel as a *people* unto himself. ... [called together] the new *people of God* (LG 9).

This sets up a dialectic between a *first or old people* and a *new or second people* ('the new covenant').

A fundamental question, which will be central to the rest of this discussion, is the following: Does God call or summon individuals separately from their Gentile community or from the people of Israel, or does he call them communally? The Council is clear: he does not call them 'as individuals without any mutual bonds'. But, it could be objected, he forms the *new people* from the *old people* of Israel, but not from the Gentiles as *peoples*. It is true that the people of God is 'among all the nations of the earth' (LG 13), but there is no reference to 'Gentile peoples'. Nevertheless it would seem that we can say that the new people has been born from the old, from the 'remnant' of Israel (as Jesus was from Mary), by the work of the holy Spirit.¹⁶ Jesus was part of the old people, Mary was, the apostles were. The *new people* was born by the holy Spirit of the old (*the flesh*): 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions' (Acts 2:17). Israel is the flesh, as 'the Word became flesh'

in Mary: it is the incarnation. Without *flesh* there would be no Christ; there would be only one nature (it would be monophytism). Without a *people* there would be no *new* people, but a collection of individuals 'without mutual bonds' (LG 9). Obviously the idea that the old people could have produced the new people by its own *potentia* (δυνάμει) is a negation of the incarnation of Christ, which is the fruit and the work of the holy Spirit himself; this is an absurd proposition which no Latin American theologian has even thought of putting forward.

Schema 1
The Origin of the Church



The important point is that, having *subsumed* in the holy Spirit, with Christ as head, by the will of the Father, the old people of Israel and the Gentiles ('Jew and Gentile, making them one, . . . to be the new people of God' LG 9), the *new* people, the Church, has been born, like Christ, in human history, into a specific people, into a *real* race, language and tradition, with *real* struggles and heroes. To take (on or up—*aufheben*) a historical people (Israel and the Gentiles) is to take the *flesh*, the history, the richness of the *previous* history of humanity. The history of peoples ('Israel according to the *flesh* wandered . . . in the desert,' of history, we may add) as communities, is 'made holy and saved' in the *new* people of God, and not just the ego-centred life of each individual who is called. It is a dialectic between the old 'people', and the new 'people', and not between an 'individual' (Christ) exclusively calling abstract 'individuals', without community, history, memories, struggles or martyrs.

At Vatican II the fact that the subject of the episcopate (Chap. III) was preceded by that of 'the people of God' *in genere* (Chap. II) was an explicit indication that the papacy, the episcopate, the ministerial priesthood, etc., are parts or elements *within* the 'people of God'.

2. THE 'PEOPLE OF GOD' AND 'POPULAR' PASTORAL WORK AT MEDELLÍN (1968)

At Medellín the double meaning of 'people' was taken over from Vatican II:

Just as Israel of old, the first People, felt the saving presence of God when he saved them from the oppression of Egypt, so we also, the new People of God, cannot but feel his saving passage (Introduction 6); . . . the hope that all the People of God,

encouraged by the Holy Spirit, commit themselves to its complete fulfilment (i.e., of the work of the conference, *ibid.* end)

However, we immediately find a difference from Vatican II, not a contradiction, but added detail, elucidation, a Latin American touch:

Among the *great mass* of the baptised in Latin America, the conditions of Christian faith, beliefs and practices ... (6,I, 1, 'Pastoral Care of the Masses'). In evaluating popular religion, we cannot start from a Western cultural interpretation (6,I, 4). Faith, and therefore the Church too, is planted and grows in the different cultural forms taken by religion among different *peoples* (6,II, 5). 'Far from being satisfied with the idea that *the people* as a whole already possesses the faith, far from contenting herself with the task of preserving the faith of *the people* ... , proposes ... a serious re-evangelisation, ... a reconversion ... of our people, ... which will push *the believing people* towards the twofold dimension of personal and community fulfilment ... (since) according to God's will human beings are to be made holy and saved, not individually but as members of a community (6,II, 8-9).

And immediately afterwards we find:

All manifestations of *popular* religion, such as pilgrimages, processions and devotional practices, should be imbued by the word of the Gospel (6,III, 12.).

These texts make it quite clear that by this time 'people' no longer has the same meaning as 'people of God' in *Lumen Gentium*. There are two reasons for this. The first is that 'the great mass of the baptised' in Latin America already form *a people*. 'People' means on the one hand the historical and cultural community and, on the other, the community of believers (the Church). In other words, in Latin America, because of the continent's ambiguous status as a 'Christian continent' (a Christian culture or civilisation), there is a confusion between 'people' in the sense of a social group in civil society and the 'people of God', the Church. On the other hand, even the people understood as a social group is not any longer a community of Gentiles, but, a 'Christian people'. This is why there can be a dialectic between a people already Christian but not sufficiently evangelised or converted and a people (Church) which is re-evangelised, re-converted. In this strict sense (the Christian people not sufficiently evangelised, the Christian people re-evangelised), we may find references to a *renewed, communitarian* 'Church', and so on.

These adjectives describe the church and groups within it, bishops, priests, religious, laity. They do not imply that those so described are a *different* church, one that is new, parallel, in opposition to the 'official' one, etc.

The second reason is that terms such as '*popular* religion' refer to the *real* poor, oppressed groups, classes ethnic groups, etc.: a social group consisting of the dominated. This is not the whole community, but a part:

the material needs of those who are deprived of the minimum living conditions, and the moral needs of those who are mutilated by selfishness, ... the oppressive structures that come from the abuse of ownership and power and from exploitation of workers or from unjust transactions (Introduction, 6).

'Popular' in this use means specific sectors of society, not the whole Christian people of Latin America. In this second sense the 'popular church' means that part of the 'people of God' (in the Vatican II sense) which is part of, or which has made a special commitment to re-evangelise, reconvert, the oppressed, the real poor, the exploited, the victims of

repression and torture, etc. The adjective 'popular' comes to mean almost the same as what John XXIII meant by 'the church of the poor'—or at least one of its possible legitimate meanings:

'A deafening cry issues from millions of human beings, asking their pastors for a liberation which reaches them from nowhere else (14,I,2, 'Poverty of the Church'); In the context of poverty and even utter deprivation in which the majority of the Latin American people live, we bishops, priests. . . . (14,I,3). In this context a *poor* church denounces the unjust lack of this world's goods. . . .' (14,II,5, italics added). With the help of all the people of God we hope to overcome the system of fees (14,III,13). For all the people of God they will be a continual call to evangelical poverty (14,III,16).

Of course, not everyone responds to these appeals for objective poverty, the poverty for which Francis of Assisi fought. Those who make a *real* response and commit themselves in their everyday lives to the *real* poor, the oppressed and exploited, are one part of the one institutional, official church. This part may be given the label 'popular church' because its members live among the real poor people, speak like them, suffer with them and fight for them: 're-evangelise', 'reconvert' (as Medellín says).

Some people, not without an express awareness of engaging in falsification, pronounce this church 'parallel', in opposition to the 'official' church, a 'different' church. Liberation theology has never sponsored these naive and simplistic terms, though that is not to say that a judge taking a phrase out of its context might not come across some expressions which might imply this deviant meaning.

Thus, on 6 May 1973, the bishops of the North-East of Brazil published a memorable document of the official, institutional Church, the one Church:

Confronted by the suffering of our people, their oppression and humiliation for so many centuries of our country's history, we have called on you [*convocar*, an ecclesial act *par excellence*] through the word of God to take up a position. We call on you to take up a *position alongside the people*, a position, more precisely, with all those who, *with the people*, commit themselves to work for their true liberation . . . We are servants, ministers, of liberation . . . As ministers of liberation, our first task is to be converted in order to serve better. We must accept this demand of the people of the North-East, who are crying out for this ministry of liberation, begging us to share their 'hunger and thirst for justice'.¹⁷

We could produce hundreds of other witnesses, but it is not necessary. The *popular* church (that is, those Christians who, as part of the one *official* church, make an effective commitment to the real poor) has been called 'the church born of the people'. This phrase provoked storms, mainly from those who had not opted for the real poor, the people of the oppressed and unjustly despoiled:

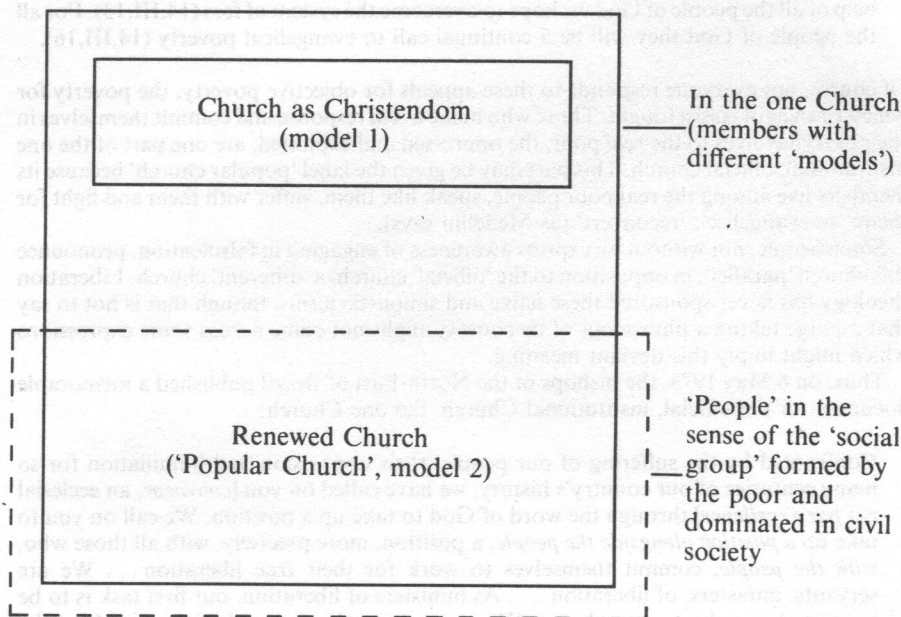
We are persecuted because we are *with the people*, defending their rights. The prelature of São Felix [said Mgr Casaldaliga] is a *persecuted church* because it has refused to be involved with the power of politics and money. And we shall be persecuted more and more because, by the power of God, we shall continue *at the side of the oppressed and poor*.¹⁸

Being with and among poor people is what it means to be a *popular* church. These people are a Christian people, and that is why the renewed, re-evangelised, reconverted church is born of the people, who are part of the same church (because they are the great believing, Christian mass of the baptised) through the holy Spirit of renewal of life. In no sense is this

'people' the 'Gentiles' of *Lumen Gentium*, and consequently there is no reason—as we shall shortly see—to fear a desire that the (non-Christian, Gentile) people may, exclusively from itself, produce the people of God, the Church.

Schema 2

*The renewed (part of the) Church
which is born or proceeds from the Church as the (whole)
'Christian people'*



3. 'PEOPLE OF GOD' AND 'BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES' AT PUEBLA (1979)

The preparations for Puebla took place in an atmosphere of confusion, sometimes deliberately created. Take this commentary, for example:

Without admitting the simplistic identification of the *people* (*pueblo*) with the *poor* (*el pobre*) and taking the expression People of God in the sense proposed by the Second Vatican Council . . . , it would be also perfectly correct to say that the People of God is the bearer of the Gospel, the subject of the Church. . . .¹⁹

Many levels are muddled here. 'People' (*pueblo*) in the first line is something like a sociological concept (like the 'social group' formed by the oppressed), and the author opposes its identification with the 'poor' (an identification which is, *sociologically*, quite possible, but has no theological implication one way or the other). It is obvious that to attempt to identify the sociological category 'people' with the 'people of God' of *Lumen Gentium* is an oversimplification which no theologian could make (not, that is, in the real meaning of a text, as opposed to a phrase taken out of context). But it can also be maintained that those who opt for or live in the situation of the people, among the real

poor, as Christians ('the people of God' who make an option for the poor and share their lives, if we accept the phrase, which is not a tautology—the *popular* 'people of God'), are also, though not exclusively, bearers of the gospel and the subject of the Church. This sense—which is what those they attack intend and what their texts say—never occurs to the critics of the 'popular church', who are trying to find a *sect* in what is a legitimate *part* of the church, the one, official, institutional Church.

At Puebla the word 'people' was used in all the senses we have indicated, but there is often no clear realisation of the move from one sense to another. Let us look at some examples.

CELAM created an environment among the Catholic *people* in which it could open itself with a degree of ease to a Church which also presented itself as a '*people*', (*pueblos*) a universal *People* which permeates other *peoples* (*pueblos*) (Puebla, 233). Our Latin American *people* (*pueblo*) spontaneously call a church 'God's house', . . . expressing the deepest and primary reality of the people of God (238)

It can be seen here that in *one case* the reference is to Latin American civil society, in *another* to society as a whole but as already Christian, and in other cases it is to the Church. It was in these not very well defined terms that the issue of the popular church was raised:

The problem of the popular church, the church born of the people (*Iglesia popular, que nace del pueblo*) has several aspects. The first obstacle is surmounted if it is understood as a Church trying to become incarnate in the *popular* environments (*medios populares*) of our continent and so arising out of the response in faith of these groups to the Lord (263).

This sense, obviously, is the true meaning of the concept of the 'popular church', a part of the one Church, the people of God, which has made a commitment to the people in the sense of the *real* poor, oppressed, those who suffer, etc. In this sense the Church 'has been born' ('*Ecclesia orta sit . . .*' a council father said) *through* the work of the holy Spirit, *of* the flesh, *of* the historical people of Latin America, but as an Israel *already* chosen (because *already* in the Church, although its evangelisation has not finished): it has been 'reborn'. The popular church is the part of the Church (from cardinals, through bishops, priests, lay people, etc.) which has opted for or shares the lives of the *real* poor. It is not a 'parallel' church set against an 'official' Church. This Manichean excision is the product of a falsifying interpretation, which is still being put forward, but it is based on a wish to destroy the legitimacy of a legitimate part of the *one* Church.

At the same time there is an accusation of Pelagianism: the Church is born of the people (in the sense of the 'Gentiles'). From this we get to a contrary position, one which is certainly outside the conciliar tradition on the Church:

This is the only way of being the church; *it is not born of the people*, but makes the people of God in that it is a call, . . . but it is not 'popular' in that it originates in the people as such.²⁰

The attempt to deny legitimacy to a Pelagian position (the Church as 'people of God' is born totally of the people, in the sense of 'Gentiles') falls into a Monophysite position: the Church is born exclusively of God; no value is given to the flesh, the community which is called together. The call '*makes the people*'; in other words, each man or woman is made holy and saved 'individually and in isolation'—in contradiction of *Lumen Gentium*. There is no sense that the Church—as Puebla teaches in many texts—calls and takes to itself a

'people', a human 'community', and in so doing also enriches itself with all the historical fruits of those peoples. The 'people of God', the *new* people, is not born *solely* or *exclusively* either from the *first* people, nor solely of the Spirit, *excluding* the flesh. Without Mary there is no Christ, and equally without flesh there is no incarnation. Without a *people* which has been called there is no 'people of God'.

This, in any case, is not the issue in the discussion about the popular church, since it is not about the origin of the Church in the beginning (the *new* people, the Church, born of the *first* people, Israel, by the work of the holy Spirit and with Jesus as its head), but about the renewal, re-evangelisation, reconversion of an *existing* Church, one which is the Christian people but can still reach the full development of its faith. In other words, the '*renewed church*', which has been transformed by its option and by being poor with the poor, is born from the 'one, official Church', but it is born of the poor of that Church, of the oppressed people. This 'renewal' of the Church is born of the Christian people itself. There is, in addition, an organisational element, but not one in opposition to the official church, since it includes *part* of the whole official Church, from lay people and religious to bishops and cardinals:

in a basic ecclesial community . . . developing their union with Christ, they are searching for a more evangelical life in the midst of the *people* . . . 'The basic ecclesial communities are an expression of the Church's preferential love for the simple *people*' (Puebla, 641-643).

There can be no doubt that the basic ecclesial communities are, as it were, the natural habitat of Christians who belong to the oppressed people and the 'people of God', belong to the poor and belong to the Church. Not all the members of the Church opt for the poor or are poor. The basic community is also the appropriate place for the participation of the poor, the poor as a people, in the Church, the 'people of God', and for those who opt for them. The poor and those who opt for them, both being members of the 'people of God', can perfectly well be called the 'popular church'. *Church* is the noun, denoting the 'people of God' according to *Lumen Gentium*; *popular* is the adjective, implying a commitment to the poor and oppressed, the historical people, the social group consisting of the oppressed. In this sense, the 'popular church' means those Christians, *within the one official and institutional church*, who have a different 'model' (meaning vision and practice) of the type of evangelisation the Church should be carrying out in the world and among the poor, and so a different 'model' of the church to which they belong wholly and legitimately.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The 'popular church' or the Church committed to the poor, in solidarity with them, in the sense indicated, has been defined for us in general terms by John Paul II:

The Church is passionately committed to this cause (of the workers) because she regards it as her mission, her service, as a proof of her fidelity to Christ, in order to be genuinely the Church of the poor. The poor are to be found in many forms: they appear in different places and at different times—in many cases we find them to be the product of the violation of the dignity of human work (*Laborem Exercens*, 8).

The Polish theologian Jozef Tischner, in his 'Ethics of Solidarity', has enabled us to see the importance to his local church of the concepts of 'country', 'nation' and 'freedom':

The problem of the country faces us daily . . . and arising from it is the question of the

preservation of the country. . . . This consciousness guides the whole nation. . . . Freedom is, as it were, a space in which we can move with security.²¹

In Latin America we have a different view of things. The 'people', rather than the country or the nation, is the chief protagonist of our current history, and this 'people' aspires, not so much to 'freedom' as to 'justice'. It is not a matter of being able to eat in freedom, but of having something to eat at all. Consequently, where some may talk of the 'national church' or the church which embodies the *national* identity, in Latin America we feel that our 'identity' is embodied in a *popular* church. Devotion to Mary, for example, is 'popular': it was with the Virgin of Guadalupe on his banner that the priest Hidalgo fought against the Spanish in the nineteenth century to liberate Mexico, and the peasant Emiliano Zapato occupied Cuernavaca, also using as his banner a picture of our Lady of Guadalupe (taken from a church). And, 'as John Paul II has pointed out, [this devotion] is part of the innermost *identity* of these *peoples*' (Puebla, 283). 'Mary was also the voice which urged us to unity as human beings and Latin American *peoples*' (282).

There are people, even within the Church, with a clear desire to create confusion. In any situation, however, it is necessary to understand the experience of a particular church, such as that of Latin America, in order not to judge it simplistically in terms of different parameters, different cultures, nations or peoples. Our 'believing people' (*pueblo creyente*) deserves the respect of being listened to, of being incorporated into the 'people of God' as a historical people, with a memory, language and culture, with heroes, martyrs and saints. Archbishop Oscar Romero died for this 'people' with an *explicit* sense of being part of the 'popular church'.

If someone asks us, for valid reasons, to give up a word, 'popular', it can go. But the underlying meaning was clearly stated by Pope John XXIII, and I may say that I had a deep personal experience of it with Paul Gauthier in Nazareth from 1959 to 1962, when we talked about 'Jesus, the Church and the poor' while working as carpenters in the Arab *shikum* in the village where Jesus said, 'The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to evangelise the poor'. It is 'the church of the poor'.

Translated by Francis McDonagh

Notes

1. See *Acta Synodalia S. Conc. Oec. Vaticani Secundi*, I/1 (Vatican 1970); I/4 (Vatican 1971), Congregation 21.

2. *Ibid.* I/4, p. 127.

3. *Ibid.* p. 126.

4. *Ibid.* p. 133.

5. *Ibid.* p. 250.

6. *Ibid.* p. 254.

7. *Le Monde*, Paris (May 1983).

8. In Congregation 3, in the message to all human beings, the Council says, 'Caritas Christi urget nos . . . super turbam fame, miseria, ignorantia laborantem' (*Ibid.*, I/1, p. 225).

9. *Ibid.* p. 256. Mgr Enrique Rau remarked, referring to the 'language of the liturgy', that 'the Latin American view is that the mass is for the people, and how can they take part if they cannot understand?' (*Ibid.*, pp. 480ff).

10. *Ibid.* II/1, p. 216.

11. *Ibid.* pp. 256ff.

12. *Ibid.* p. 334.

13. *Ibid.* p. 798.

14. *Ibid.* II/2, pp. 236–26. Cardinal de Barros Camar also spoke on 'De Populo Dei in genere' (Congregation 51, 18 Oct. 1963, pp. 55ff.

15. *Ibid.* III/1 (1973) pp. 181ff.

16. 'The new Israel . . . is also called the church of Christ. For He has bought it for Himself with His blood, has filled it with His Spirit, and provided it with those means which befit it as a visible and social unity' (LG 9).

17. *SPES* (Lima) 4,21 (1973) 5ff; *Los obispos latinoamericanos entre Medellin y Puebla* (San Salvador 1978) pp. 40–63. See E. Dussel. *De Medellin a Puebla* (Mexico 1979) pp. 229ff.

18. See *Mensaje* (Santiago de Chile) 226 (1974) 52.

19. B. Kloppenburg *Informe sobre la Iglesia popular* (Mexico 1978) p. 58.

20. J. Lozano Barrangan *La Iglesia del Pueblo* (Mexico 1983) p. 106.

21. Italian translation, Bologna 1981, p. 137.