

The Beautiful Road to Puebla: Joaquín Alliende, Mariology, and the Flowering of Popular Piety

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Resumen: Décadas de pensamiento, estudio y diálogo precedieron a la Conferencia de Puebla en 1979, que marca un trabajo fundamental de los obispos latinoamericanos al afirmar la centralidad de la piedad popular para la evangelización del pueblo latinoamericano. Si bien muchas de las figuras clave en el desarrollo histórico de la piedad popular provenían de Argentina, la contribución del sacerdote chileno de Schoenstatt, Padre Joaquín Alliende, agregó una dimensión integral al estudio cultural de la piedad popular. Alliende, en diálogo con otras figuras influyentes de la Región del Río de la Plata, jugó un papel fundamental en la génesis del pensamiento en torno a la piedad popular al dar testimonio de la inmensa fuerza de ella como instrumento de evangelización.

Palabras Clave: piedad popular, mariología, auto-evangelización, evangelización

Abstract: Decades of thought, study, and dialogue preceded the Puebla Conference of 1979, which marks the seminal work of the Latin American Bishops in affirming the centrality of popular piety to the evangelization of the Latin American *pueblo*. While many of the key-figures in the historical development of popular piety hailed from Argentina, the contribution of Chilean Schoenstatt priest, Padre Joaquín Alliende, added an integral dimension to the cultural study of popular piety. Alliende, in dialogue with other influential figures from the Río de la Plata Region, played pivotal roles in the genesis of thought surrounding popular piety by bearing witness to the immense force of popular piety as an instrument of evangelization.

Keywords: popular piety, Mariology, auto-evangelization, evangelization

INTRODUCTION

Though many facets of Latin American culture bear the heavy influence of *piedad popular* (popular piety), also known as *religiosidad popular* (popular religiosity), thinkers and theologians in most pastoral schools dismissed popular piety as witchcraft, syncretism, voodoo, fatalism, *santería*, uneducated faith, etc¹. In the long history of the Church, the relatively recent approbation of the evangelizing merits of popular piety reflects decades of gradual genesis of thought by way of academic studies, formal conferences, and candid dialogue.

This nuanced account of popular piety is informed by personal anecdotes, unique insights, and unprecedented commentary from a not-often-identified “key-player,” Padre Joaquín Alliende, in the discussion surrounding popular piety². Padre Alliende’s contribution to the Puebla document, doubtless informed by his experiences as the rector of the National Sanctuary of Maipú, a Marian shrine, exemplifies what Pope Paul VI calls the *via pulchritudinis*, the path of beauty to the fullness of God’s love. My focus on Padre Alliende serves the two complementary aims of this paper: (1) to highlight the unique, Chilean contribution to modern concept of popular piety; (2) to emphasize the centrality of both Marian devotion and interdisciplinary study to the intellectual genesis of popular piety. Precisely because of lived experience in the *pueblos* and direct contact with culture of the people, which figures like Alliende brought to the discussion, popular piety

¹ Though *religiosidad popular*, often translated “popular religiosity,” and *piedad popular*, often translated “popular piety,” are frequently used interchangeably, Pope Paul VI in Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* distinguishes between the two terms, identifying popular piety with the “religion of the people, rather than religiosity.” Here, the suffix “-sity” implies a mere quality of religion or a way of being religious, but not religion itself. Following Pope Paul VI, I have elected to refer to this cultural devotional phenomenon as “popular piety,” rather than “popular religiosity.”

² J. ALLIENDE, interviewed by Emily Normand, June 23, 2018, transcript. Though Padre Alliende is not mentioned by name in the Final Document of the Puebla Conference, during my 2018 interview with him, he confirmed his role as redactor of the text on popular piety.

was able to be liberated from the bonds of unilateral, secularized study³.

In order to demonstrate this, it is important to first rehearse the development of popular piety beginning with Medellín. Having thereby established the socio-historical background surrounding Medellín, I will then turn to Allende's crucial contributions rooted in his Chilean heritage and Marian piety. Finally, I will conclude by pressing upon the novelty of the Puebla Conference and its long-lasting legacy.

1. SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND TO MEDELLÍN AND RECEPTION OF MEDELLÍN

Though the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM) had been established in Río de Janeiro, Brazil in 1955, the Medellín Conference of 1968 provided the first opportunity for the Latin American Bishops to apply the Vatican II spirit of evangelization to the political and economic realities in Latin America, which, at the time, looked rather bleak. The Medellín Conference was first proposed by a Chilean, the then-president of CELAM, Don Manuel Larraín, Bishop of Talca in 1965. In a meeting convened by Pope Paul VI on the occasion of the tenth-year-anniversary of the founding of CELAM, the progressive Chilean bishop conceived a gathering with the purpose of recounting the developments in CELAM since its founding in 1955 and reorienting the Latin American Church in accordance with the new directive proposed in Vatican II moving forward⁴. The proposal was readily accepted by all the bishops, and Pope Paul VI sanctioned the idea

³ See C. PARKER, *Otra Lógica en América Latina, Religión popular y modernización capitalista* (Fondo de cultura económica, Santiago de Chile 1993) 41-66.

⁴ Bishop Larraín was the first bishop in Latin America to distribute the surplus lands belonging to the Catholic Church to the poor, landless peasants. See A. CROSTHWAITE, "Medellin Conference (CELAM II)," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions* (Springer International Publishing, 2016) 930-932.

preliminarily, encouraging the drafting of a new Continental Pastoral Plan for Latin America⁵.

Though the Latin American bishops hoped for a far-reaching evangelization initiative post Vatican II, the final document of Medellín ultimately fell short of expectations due to its heavy reliance on a secular sociology. The preference for a sociological study of religious themes was largely predicated on the 1965 publication of *Gaudium et spes*, which, according to the Chilean Jesuit and anthropologist, Renato Poblete, “emphasized the autonomy of the temporal, proposed more of an anthropology than a model, and insisted that the mission of the Church be strictly religious”⁶. Some Latin American bishops, dissatisfied with the suggestion that the duty of the Church should be sequestered to the pulpit on Sundays, applied pressure for a small addendum to be made in *Gaudium et spes* No. 42: “But out of this religious mission itself comes a function, a light and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law,” which emphasized the belief that pastoral duties should spill out of the church into the streets if the Church hoped to have efficacious bearing on the lives of the faithful⁷.

Based on this crucial assumption that political, economic, and social realities of the people also fall under the jurisdiction of the evangelizing duties of the Catholic Church, bishops and Catholic lay

⁵ See PAUL VI, *Discorso nel X anniversario del CELAM* (November 23, 1965), online: https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651123_celam (accessed: 01/05/2023).

⁶ R. POBLETE, “From Medellín to Puebla: Notes for Reflection,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (1979) 31-44. In light of now substantiated reports of a long history of sexual abuse, Fr. Poblete’s reputation must undergo major review. Though his actions are unjustifiable and deeply condemnable, he is nevertheless a major contributor to the discussion surrounding popular piety. Though the actions of Fr. Poblete have regrettably been the cause of great tragedy and scandal, his contributions to this theological discussion are necessary to understanding the historical development of popular piety. For this reason, I will not omit references to the work of Fr. Poblete in the body of this paper.

⁷ Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7th, 1965, online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed: 01/05/2023).

people started by commissioning anthropologists and sociologists to carry-out a wide range of studies in the Latin American *pueblos* in preparation for Medellín⁸.

Some of the first studies that took place were the work of Renato Poblete, and though the early studies provided a relatively thorough sociological analysis, they lacked a comprehensive cultural study requisite to reach the heart of the people on the receiving-end of the desired evangelization initiative⁹. Widespread secularized sociological study coincided with the great seminarian crisis in Latin America. At this time, Europe saw an influx of young Latin American seminarians, reflecting an ostensible dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in pastoral formation in Latin American seminaries. The Belgian sociological school, in particular, focused largely on quantitative means of conducting sociological studies and soon enough “secular ideologies began to replace the Church’s social doctrine”¹⁰.

The Medellín Conference of 1968 and the subsequent document produced from the conference resulted impactful insofar as it united the Latin American bishops for the first-time post Vatican II in a serious effort to consider the pastoral state of the Church in Latin America. Forthright concern for impoverished and working-class people was one of the main merits of Medellín. The Medellín Conference, unlike Vatican II, took a straightforward and unmistakable stance in favor of reorienting the Church towards its poorest members:

The Lord’s distinct commandment to “evangelize the poor” ought to bring us to a distribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors and to those segregated for any cause whatsoever, animating and accelerating the initiatives and studies that are already being made with that goal in mind. We, the bishops, wish

⁸ R. POBLETE, “From Medellín to Puebla,” 31.

⁹ R. POBLETE, et al., *La Iglesia en Chile* (Oficina Internacional de Investigaciones Sociales de FERES, Friburgo 1962).

¹⁰ R. POBLETE, “From Medellín to Puebla,” 34.

to come closer to the poor in sincerity and brotherhood, making ourselves accessible to them¹¹.

The Conference is often lauded as the cornerstone of Liberation Theology wherein Pope John XXIII's noteworthy phrase, first appearing in the Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes*, "the church of the poor," gets interpreted by way of the Medellín Conference.¹² The novel translation of Pope John XXIII's "the church of the poor," into the context of the Medellín Conference renders it such that in Medellín the Church, "not only relates the faith and church to the world and history (an accomplishment of the council), but also now in a fundamental way to the poor," which marked a tremendous step forward in making the Church an agent for efficacious social change in its most impoverished communities post-Vatican II¹³.

Following Vatican II, Paul VI published *Populorum progressio*, "On the development of peoples," on March 26th, 1967, wherein he unequivocally called upon the moral duties of wealthier nations to provide aid to those poorer nations¹⁴. Just nine months after the publication, Paul VI gave his formal approval for the Medellín Conference. Paul VI was also the first pope to travel outside of Europe and the first to travel outside of Italy since 1809. His visit to Colombia marked the first papal visit to Latin America in history, and he addressed his first homily, just before the opening, to the poor *campesinos*. He exhorted

all of the governments of Latin America and all the other continents, as well as the leading classes of the world to continue confronting poverty with even more broad and valiant outlooks and to seek reforms that secure a more efficient social order with progressive

¹¹ CELAM, "La Pobreza de la Iglesia," in *Conclusiones de Medellín* (Secretariado General del CELAM, Santa Fe de Bogotá 1991) 2.

¹² T. WALATKA, "Church as Sacrament: Gutiérrez and Sobrino as Interpreters of Lumen Gentium," *Horizons* 42, no. 1 (2015) 72.

¹³ T. WALATKA, "Church as Sacrament," 75.

¹⁴ PAUL VI, *Populorum Progressio* (Castelvecchi, Roma 2017).

benefits for the less fortunate classes and with a more favorable distribution of taxes for the most oppressed¹⁵.

The revolutionary homily set the tone for the entire Medellín Conference. Just the next day, August 24th, 1968, some two-hundred delegates gathered in the Cathedral of Bogotá for the opening. The beginning of the final document begins with an injunction to the clergy:

As pastors, with a common responsibility, we must commit ourselves to the lives of all of our peoples and the distressing search for adequate solutions to their multiplicity of problems. Our mission is to contribute to the integral promotion of man and of the communities of this continent¹⁶.

This links socio-economic and political crisis of the people to the evangelizing mission of the Church and follows in the spirit of *Populorum progressio*, addressing a need for integral pastoral care for the Latin American Church. The Medellín Conference, in fact, reflects the only continental response to Vatican II up to that point and projected a vibrant originality in its “new collaborative spirit which permeated the event and inaugurated a new way of being church, and which would in turn give birth to a true Latin American ecclesial identity”¹⁷. For the first time, the thinkers at the Medellín Conference probed into what made the Latin American project of evangelization unique and, subsequently, what the distinct character of the Latin American church prescribed for the process of evangelization.

¹⁵ PAUL VI, Santa Misa para los campesinos colombianos, Homilía del Santo Pablo VI, 6 September 1969, online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/homilies/1968/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19680823.html (accessed: 01/05/2023).

¹⁶ CELAM, *Mensaje a los pueblos de América Latina*, 6 September 1968, online: http://www.inculturacion.net/phocadownload/Conclusiones_Celam/Medellin.pdf (accessed: 01/05/2023).

¹⁷ See C. SCHICKENDANTZ, “Único ejemplo de una recepción continental del Vaticano II,” *Teología* 108 (2012) 25–53. The author refers to the origin of this expression in L. ESCALANTE, *La estructura jurídica y sinodal del Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) y de la Reunión de los Obispos de América* (diss., Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, 2002) 79. See also R. LUCIANI, “Medellín Fifty Years Later: From Development to Liberation,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2018) 566–89.

In the Medellín document, the Church receives one of the first post-Conciliar acknowledgements of popular piety as it explicitly relates to indigenous cultural practice.¹⁸ For some, such as Chilean priest, Segundo Galilea, Medellín succeeded to “capture the soul of the Church and of Latin America”¹⁹. For others though, such as Joaquín Alliende and other proponents of popular piety from the Río de la Plata school of Lucio Gera, such as Juan Carlos Scannone, and Alberto Methol-Ferré, the conference lacked a concise pastoral directive. According to Alliende, the results were “unilateral” in terms of popular religion and represent a lack of confidence on the part of the bishops in their own analytical methodology. In response to Medellín, Alliende repeated something that Ferré, who worked in CELAM in the 1970s and 1980s, used to say to him, and which Alliende again mentioned in an article that appeared in the *Revista Humanitas*:

Alberto Methol, in those years, joked that it would be equally as useful to research the sale of toothpaste in Chicago as to inquire about the trinitarian faith of the farmers in the heart of Uruguay. Latin America, understood as a sociometric map, was a field too distant and indecipherable for the Church to be able to understand how to help belief through means of evangelizing work²⁰.

In other words, to study the soul of Latin America, the bishops used a North American and Euro-Belgian science that was better suited to measure the sale of toothpaste. It was a purely secular science developed in the United States and Europe and *de facto* excluded cultural religiosity. One such example is a 1961 study consisting of

¹⁸ CELAM, “Educación,” in *Conclusiones de Medellín* (Secretariado General del CELAM, Santa Fe de Bogotá 1991) 2: “Especialmente en el caso de los indígenas se han de respetar los valores propios de su cultura, sin excluir el diálogo creador con otras culturas.” For pre-Medellín allusion to inculturation of indigenous religions in the final documents of Vatican II, see *Ad gentes* 11 and *Lumen gentium* 17.

¹⁹ S. GALILEA, “Between Medellín and Puebla,” *CrossCurrents* 28, no. 1 (1978) 71-78, online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24458376> (accessed: 01/05/2023).

²⁰ J. ALLIENDE, “Lo crucial de la *Evangelii nuntiandi* para América Latina,” *Revista Humanitas* 89 (Spring 2018), online: <http://www.humanitas.cl/iglesia/lo-crucial-de-la-evangelii-nuntiandi-para-america-latina> (accessed 04/07/2019).

testimonies from each member of one lower-class Mexican family²¹. Though it was a valiant effort to understand what American anthropologist, Oscar Lewis, calls the “culture of poverty,” it presented the fatalistic religion of a single family as a microcosm of all popular piety²².

Some, such as Uruguayan Jesuit theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, remained unconvinced of the merits of popular piety at all. According to Segundo, the defense of “tradition” and of the “popular religion” is, “assumed for all who represent an established order wherein the «death of God» is already a reality.”²³ In other words, expressions of popular piety are only conserved by those places where religion primarily exists as “the function of giving psychological security and of protecting the fantasies and collective needs”²⁴.

Uncertainty and discord amongst conference participants about how to tackle the question of popular piety made for a convoluted presentation of it in the Final Documents of Medellín. Section VI of the Final Document on “Pastoral Care of the Masses” is ridden with contradiction. For example, the faith of the *pueblo* is characterized as leaving “much to be desired” and their “participation in the official cultural life is almost nil and their adherence to the organized Church weak,” though they “manifest an enormous reserve of authentic Christian virtues, particularly in the order of charity”²⁵. The

²¹ O. LEWIS, *The Children of Sánchez. Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (Random House, New York 1961).

²² The “culture of poverty” (shortened from the “subculture of poverty”) refers to a socio-economic theory put forth in the 60s by major anthropologists such as Oscar Lewis and Michael Harrington, which postulates that poor people operate within a values system that perpetuates their own poverty.

²³ J. L. SEGUNDO, *Liberación de la teología* (Lohlé, Buenos Aires 1975) 105.

²⁴ G. NEIRA, *Religión popular católica latinoamericana. Tres líneas de interpretación (1960-1980)* (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá 2007) 42: “La religión popular –según J. L. Segundo– cumple las funciones de dar seguridad psicológica y de ser proyección de las aspiraciones y necesidades grupales.”

²⁵ LATIN AMERICAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE (CELAM), *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council II: Conclusions* (General Secretariat of CELAM, Bogotá 1970) 122.

presentation of popular piety in the document vacillates between praise and cautious admonition, as is evident in the following excerpt:

In our evaluation of popular religion, we may not take as our frame of reference the westernized cultural interpretation of the middle and upper classes; rather we must judge its meaning in the context of the sub-cultures of the rural and marginal urban groups. Its expressions may be deformed and to some extent confused with an ancestral religious heritage in which tradition plays an almost tyrannical role. They are very easily influenced by magic and superstitious practices that reveal a utilitarian character and a certain fear of the divine which necessitates the intercession of beings closer to man, and more visible concrete expressions. These religious expressions may, nevertheless, be the stammerings of an authentic religious sense expressed by means of the cultural elements at their disposal²⁶.

The bishops realized that if they wanted to reach the “soul” of Latin America, they would need to integrate a robust cultural analysis of the *pueblo*.²⁷

²⁶ CELAM, *The Church in the Present-Day*, 123.

²⁷ I am aware that using the language “soul of Latin America,” implies a sort of essentialism, i.e., the conception that culture and cultural identity definitively fixes symbolic meaning to a people and thereby, ignores the possibility of dynamic cultural change over time. In Latin America, notions of essentialism usually imply an implicit resistance to the notion of “modernity” rooted in the culture itself. One prominent form of essentialism is catholic essentialism, which proposes Baroque Catholicism as an integral and unshakeable part of Latin American cultural identity and thereby, renders Latin American culture inherently antithetical and unreceptive to post-Enlightenment modernity. Chilean sociologist, Jorge Larraín, is among those who oppose essentialism as a valid means of describing collective identity. Given that Larraín cites Pedro Morandé, Juan Carlos Scannone, Cristián Parker, Alberto Methol Ferré, and other prominent scholars cited in this paper as thinkers who promulgate, to varying degrees, catholic essentialism, and given that these thinkers had a major influence on Allende’s own theology, it is important to briefly discuss catholic essentialism in light of this paper. Though throughout the paper I refer to a certain “soul” of Latin America, which is language adopted from the aforementioned scholars, I do not believe that using this language in regards to popular piety is tantamount to catholic essentialism. In this context, there is no implication that the “soul” of Latin America is necessarily symbolic or static, but rather a dynamic force

2. JOAQUÍN ALLIENDE AND THE CHILEANS

Secular and largely quantitative research, though well-intentioned, fell short of the desires of many who hoped for revitalized pastoral initiative of the reigning school of thinkers behind popular piety, such as the Argentine school of Lucio Gera. Though the majority of thinkers originated from Argentina, it would be an egregious oversight to omit other key figures from the narrative, such as Alberto Methol Ferré of Uruguay, the Chilean contributors Pedro Morandé and Renato Poblete, and most especially Chilean Schoenstatt priests Hernán Alessandri²⁸ and Joaquín Alliende. While the Argentine group thought and wrote prolifically and consistently on the subject of popular piety, Alliende made the crucial contribution of a lived encounter with popular piety through a Marian lens.²⁹ As Schoenstatt priests charged

for social change. Though Larraín suggests that Puebla affirms a catholic essentialism, he does not include mention of The Final Document of Puebla, n. 466, which proposes popular religion as a plastic force for social change, evangelization, joy, and hope in the modern, urban-industrial age. See CELAM, *Documento de Puebla*, n. 466, online: https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Puebla.pdf (accessed: 01/05/2023); J. LARRAÍN, "Identidad latinoamericana: crítica del discurso esencialista católico," *A contra corriente* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2007) 1-28; J. LARRAÍN, "Latin American varieties of modernity," in N. KARAGIANNIS – P. WAGNER (eds.), *Varieties of World-making: Beyond Globalization* (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2007) 41-58.

²⁸ Hernán Alessandri Morandé (1935-2007) was a Chilean priest of the Schoenstatt order. He and Alliende met at the age of 17 in school and the two remained great friends, highly influencing each other until Alessandri's last days. In his career, Alessandri gave lectures and wrote many books and articles, especially related to the pastoral care of the family and ecclesiology. His last book was titled, *La Propuesta evangelizadora de Schoenstatt*, a synthesizing work that describes the converging thought of John Paul II and Padre José Kentenich, the founder of Schoenstatt. He is also the founder of a non-profit organization created to support child maltreatment called "María Ayuda" (1983). Alessandri was an active participant in CELAM and a key collaborator at the Puebla Conference of 1979.

²⁹ One could devote a tome to the topic of Mariology and more specifically, Mariology and popular piety. For now, it will suffice to note that the "Marian lens" is central to Alliende's theology and the center of his contribution to Puebla. According to Alliende, Medellín lacked a substantial Marian reflection in light of popular piety. Mary is central to not only the development of popular piety as it appears in Puebla, but to the past, present, and future of popular piety in Latin America. Theologian

with pastoral care of the National Sanctuary of Maipú in Chile dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Joaquín Alliende and Hernán Alessandri, in particular, were able to bring a vibrant and unfiltered cultural analysis to the table centered around Marian devotion.

If we take Chile as a case study, evidence of cultural analysis, as distinguished from a strict sociological study, appears in early 1968 just after Pope Paul VI announced the Medellín Conference. Written on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Chilean Declaration of Independence, the Episcopal Conference of Chile, spearheaded by the then-Archbishop of Santiago, Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, and Monsignor Bernardino Piñera, published the letter “Chile, voluntad de ser,” on the 5th of April, 1968. For the first time, the Chilean bishops considered the idea of “country” inseparable from the culture of the people who inhabit the geographical space that constitutes the country.³⁰ Alliende cites himself as the redactor of the document under the direction of Cardinal Raúl Silva and Monsignor Bernardino Piñera, and his hand is evident in the document, as it focuses specifically on the National Sanctuary of Maipú where he was serving as rector, living and breathing devotional practices of the masses each day³¹.

Benjamín Pereira, cites Otto Kern’s observation that there is nothing more sacred than our relationship with the Virgen Mary because in that relationship, we probe the most intimate and mysterious relationship of all, the bond between mother and child. Pereira concludes that the *pueblo* is the unique bridge which translates the spiritual motherhood of God to the people. Mary is absolutely crucial to developing a proper theology of popular religion, because in Marian devotion, we find an incarnate and current link between faith and the *pueblo*. All Marian National Shrines represent not only a place for spiritual growth, but a symbolic, yet concrete unifier for the *pueblo*. Marian shrines both represent the past and light the way of hope for the future. As an anchor in the past, symbol of the present, and beacon of future hope, Mary is the perfect articulating principle of what “popular” means for Latin America. This far-reaching understanding of the *pueblo* encapsulated in Mary is integral for real growth and total liberation of the *pueblo*. More research needs to be done on the later tradition of social Mariology. For more on Alliende’s own Mariology, see J. ALLIENDE, “La cuestión mariana en América Latina,” *Medellín* (1978) 423-433.

³⁰ “Chile, voluntad de ser,” online: <https://www.bcn.cl/obtienearchivo?id=documentos/10221.1/45880/1/186669.pdf> (accessed: 01/05/2023).

³¹ Alliende Interview, 2018.

While Allende was at the National Sanctuary of Maipú, Argentine priest, Rafael Tello served as the chaplain for the National Shrine of Our Lady of Luján in Buenos Aires, Argentina³². It is no coincidence that both Allende and Tello, fulfilling similar roles in adjoining geographic regions, both wrote prolifically on the subject of Mary. During the time in which Allende and Tello were writing about Mariology from the *pueblos*, Pope Paul VI started publishing on the subject himself. By 1975, Pope Paul VI had published four Marian documents, all devotional in nature, and just after the Synod on Evangelization, he gave a lengthy discourse touching Marian devotion for the “Congresso Mariologico e Mariano” on May 16th, 1975³³. It is in this address that Paul VI made the seminal distinction between a scientific study of Mary, *Via veritatis*, and a popular and aesthetic one, *Via pulchritudinis*³⁴.

³² In honor of Enrique Bianchi’s book launch in 2012 on the life and work of Rafael Tello, Bergoglio emerged to pay homage to Tello. Bergoglio presented the book in conjunction with Bianchi proclaiming: “He was a man of God, sent to open roads [...] Like every prophet, he was not understood by many of his time [...] Today, in this Faculty which owes so much to his former professor, I wish to present a grateful memory of his life, which was a God’s gift to our Church” (“Conferencia de Bergoglio en presentación de libro sobre Tello,” YouTube video, 13:30, “QB,” June 4, 2012, online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boCYFCfCU4k&t=1s> (accessed: 01/05/2023)). See R. TELLO, *La Nueva Evangelización* (Agape, Buenos Aires 2008) Section II.

³³ Over the course of four documents, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), *Christi Matri* (1966), *Signum Magnum* (1967), and *Marialis Cultus* (1973), Pope Paul VI sustains an augmented interest in Mariology from an evangelizing standpoint.

³⁴ PAOLO VI, “Discorso di Paolo VI ai Congressi mariologico e mariano,” 16 May 1975, III, online: https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches/1975/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19750516_congresso-mariologico.html (accessed: 01/05/2023). Original Italian: “Al riguardo, si possono seguire due vie. La *via della verità*, anzitutto, cioè della speculazione biblico-storico-teologica, che riguarda l’esatta collocazione di Maria nel mistero di Cristo e della Chiesa: è la via dei dotti, quella che voi seguite, necessaria certamente, di cui si avvantaggia la dottrina mariologica. Ma vi è anche, oltre a questa, una via accessibile a tutti anche alle anime semplici: è la *via della bellezza*, alla quale ci conduce, alla fine, la dottrina misteriosa, meravigliosa e stupenda che forma il tema del Congresso Mariano: Maria e lo Spirito Santo.” See also F. X. CLOONEY, “Traveling the *Via Pulchritudinis*—Both Ways,” in P. J. CASARELLA (ed.) *Finding Beauty in the Other: Theological Reflections Across Religious Traditions* (Crossroad, New York 2018) 216.

Medellín's lack of clarity on the subject of popular piety gave rise to concentrated studies on popular religion. In 1969, the CELAM commissioned a comparative sociological study of popular piety in five different countries: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico. The study, entitled "Religiosidad popular en América latina," was carried out by the Latin American sector of FERES (International Federation of Sociological and Socio-religious Research Institutes) with the goal of being able to form a pastoral plan retrofitted to Latin America³⁵. Though the comparative model proved more insightful than previous work, it still reflected the same sociological approach with little nuanced understanding of evangelization.

One of the first academic steps outside of pure sociological study was from the *Equipo Coordinador de Investigaciones de Sociedad y Religión* (ECOISYR), formed by a group of sociologists who, unlike many sociologists at the time, were interested in an interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion. They came together with the goal of rejuvenating pastoral practices for better evangelization in Latin America as prescribed by Vatican II and Medellín.³⁶ At the forefront of this interdisciplinary project stood Aldo Büntig, who served as the director of ECOISYR. He initially set out to define *catolicismo popular* in more precise terms and to rid it of the superstition and skepticism that revolved around it in those days. The pejorative and narrow definitions of popular piety, Büntig believed, would be overcome by a comprehensive study of the concept. Unfortunately, ECOISYR's interdisciplinary matrix did not "save" popular piety from criticism, but used methods that appeared paradigmatic in order to analyze a phenomenon—a phenomenon that for them was considered impure *a priori*. Though it seems the trend of conducting pre-Medellín secularized study on the subject of religion was not abandoned forthright, the interdisciplinary nature of the study nevertheless marked a step in the right direction.

It was ultimately this gravitation towards interdisciplinary study and dialogue, adopted by Alliende, that allowed popular piety to

³⁵ C. JOHANSSON, *Religiosidad popular entre Medellín y Puebla. Antecedentes y desarrollo* (Anales de la Facultad de Teología 41/64; UC, Santiago de Chile 1990) 126.

³⁶ See G. NEIRA, *Religión popular católica latinoamericana*.

blossom. Leading up to the pivotal Puebla Conference (1979), five crucial meetings played a role: The CELAM Asamblea XIV in Sucre (1972), a general meeting in Buenos Aires (April, 1973), the CELAM Asamblea XV (1974), the Synod on Evangelization (1974), and a general meeting in Bogotá (August, 1976).

The Sucre Conference saw the revolutionary integration of the presidents of the Episcopal Conferences to the CELAM Asamblea. Ferré historically remarked that the integration represented an “important change for CELAM’s dynamics and orientations”³⁷. The now diversified group met again the following year in Buenos Aires where Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, Lucio Gera, Ferré, and Allende all contributed to a lively dialogue.

Following an ample discussion of popular piety in Buenos Aires, Allende recalls dropping Cardinal Eduardo Pironio off at the airport; the Cardinal, thrilled about the ideas discussed, assured Allende he would relay everything to Pope Paul VI before the upcoming CELAM General Assembly and the subsequent Synod on Evangelization.³⁸ Pironio and Paul VI were close friends, and Paul VI deeply trusted Pironio to the point of criticism which some called “blind faith.” Whatever the case may be, Paul VI learned of the vibrant dialogue that took place in Buenos Aires on the subject of popular piety³⁹.

At the CELAM Asamblea of 1974, the Theological-Pastoral Team, created by Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, was charged with a study on popular piety, which Ferré also considered a fundamental underpinning for *Evangelii nuntiandi* and later, the final document of Puebla. The document was called “Algunos aspectos de la evangelización en América Latina,” which consisted of eight themes, the fifth being popular piety. In this study, Joaquín Allende, Lucio Gera, and Ferré were all participants⁴⁰.

³⁷ Allende interview, 2018.

³⁸ Allende interview, 2018.

³⁹ A. M. BIDEGAÍN, *Obispos de la Patria Grande, Pastores, Profetas y Mártires* (Edit. Celam, Bogotá 2018) 87-86.

⁴⁰ “Algunos aspectos de la evangelización en América latina,” *Boletín Celam*, 18 (1974), in EQUIPO SELADOC, *Religiosidad popular* (Sígueme, Salamanca 1976) 26-31.

By the III Ordinary General Assembly, “Evangelization in the Modern World,” (September 27th 1974 - October 26th 1974), popular piety had become so central to the study of evangelization that the subject could not be ignored in a conference about evangelization.⁴¹ The fruit of the Synod, the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* on December 8th, 1975 is perhaps the most pivotal document for the popular piety moving towards the Puebla Conference. Though the document reproves misguided practices of popular religion such as fatalism, syncretism, voodoo, and *santería*, it at the same time lauds a properly formed popular piety:

It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion. By reason of these aspects, we readily call it “popular piety,” that is, religion of the people, rather than religiosity⁴².

Straightforward approval from the Holy See gave the proponents of popular piety fuel to combat those who remained inclined to divorce popular piety from evangelization.

In his 2019 article on the merits of *Evangelii nuntiandi* and its transformative role for the trajectory of popular piety, Allende lauds Pope Paul VI and affirms that the document reflects “not only a maturation of the Magisterium, but also creates a living channel of dialogue between our churches and the Pope”⁴³. *Evangelii nuntiandi* showcased a fair and culturally intuitive review of popular religion which, according to Galilea, made for a “magnificent document:

⁴¹ Interestingly enough, along with Cardinal Pironio, a future Pope John Paul II was also present at this conference, who would fiercely defend popular piety at the Puebla Conference just five years later.

⁴² PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 48.

⁴³ J. ALLIENDE, “Lo crucial de la *Evangelii Nuntiandi* para América Latina.”

courageous, inspiring, and evangelically advanced [that] the upcoming Conference cannot help but follow.”⁴⁴ Allende related that, when Paul VI wrote *Evangelii nuntiandi*, he called the Secretary General of the CELAM at the time, Alfonso López Trujillo, and extrapolated three themes in his exhortation that came from Latin America:

Ecclesial-Base Communities
Liberation Theology
Popular Religion⁴⁵

Paul VI called López Trujillo with the request that the Latin American Church take these three central themes and elaborate upon them. After talking with the Pope, López Trujillo went directly to Allende and charged him specifically with the task of convening a meeting centered around the three themes⁴⁶.

In his conversation with López Trujillo, Allende agreed to organize a gathering in Bogotá of August 1976 with the firm stipulation that if he were to convene a meeting, he would have to be allowed to invite divergent currents of thought to weigh-in on the conversation. López Trujillo agreed to his interdisciplinary and extremely pivotal caveat for fate of popular piety in the Church. In a masterful move, Allende purposefully centered the conference around the liturgy, and not specifically popular piety, to attract a more diversified group of participants. Despite participation from contending schools of thought, there was surprisingly little opposition in terms of popular piety and no opposition on the subject of Mariology. When the conference was over, Allende recalls that Ferré, so pleased with the fruits of the meetings, declared, *aquí está Puebla*. Following the Bogotá meeting, Allende and Ferré were in charge of redacting the texts from the discussions, and the document they produced is absolutely key to the final validation of popular piety against secularization⁴⁷. Rather than taking the common, lukewarm stance in regards to popular piety,

⁴⁴ S. GALILEA, “Between Medellín and Puebla,” 72.

⁴⁵ Allende Interview, 2018.

⁴⁶ See P. E. SIGMUND, “The Battle of Puebla,” in *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019) 1-14.

⁴⁷ C. JOHANSSON, *Religiosidad popular entre Medellín y Puebla*, 250.

the document they produced unapologetically considers it as: “the basic identity of our people and fundamental style of our Church”⁴⁸. Allende refers to the document as the *bogotazo* of popular piety⁴⁹. The interdisciplinary meeting and the document that came from it gave the unequivocal approbation of popular piety that was requisite for it to be discussed with absolute clarity at the upcoming Puebla Conference.

3. PUEBLA FOR THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Leading up to the Puebla Conference, Allende published an article called, “La cuestión mariana en América Latina,” which appeared in *Revista Medellín* in 1978. In that article, Allende highlights the stunning lack of Mariology in the previous Medellín conference given the centrality of Mariology to a thorough study of popular piety:

From Medellín to Puebla there is a considerable evolution to be considered on the subject of Mary: in regards to what the Third General Episcopal Conference achieved, it is best expressed by Rafael Ortega as “the inexplicable silence of the Final Documents of Medellín in relation to the figure of Mary.” In reality, it was stunning that the bishops, coming from Vatican II, had not once stopped to reflect on the subject of Mary and to amplify the person of Mary on our continent⁵⁰.

A group of bishops from Central America read the article and agreed with Allende’s insistence on the primacy of Mariology to popular piety. It was the Central American bishops that requested that Allende be named Secretary of the Commission of Culture of Religion for the Puebla Conference.

⁴⁸ CELAM, *Iglesia y religiosidad popular en América latina. Ponencias y documento final* (Bogotá 1977) 383-417.

⁴⁹ *Bogotazo* refers to street-riots in Bogotá and throughout Colombia sparked by the assassination of a liberal political leader and presidential candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9th 1948. The riots left most of the city in ruins. In this context, *bogotazo* is a reference to the way in which one small event had a large ripple effect.

⁵⁰ J. ALLIENDE, “La cuestión mariana en América Latina,” 423-433.

As Secretary of the Commission, Allende was charged with the task of redacting the entirety of the section on popular piety, which, he says, assumed the entirety of the liturgical thought from the previous conference in Bogotá. Allende clarified that the Commission did not represent the school of popular piety *per se*, but rather “popular culture,” which poured forth in popular piety⁵¹. This sort of thinking connects directly to the revolutionary idea that emerged in Puebla, the concept of auto-evangelization whereby popular piety is not only a means of evangelization, but a way by which the people continually bathe themselves in the richness of the faith through simple expressions of their own culture. The final documents of the Puebla Conference go so far as to affirm that “popular religiosity is not only the object of evangelization but also insofar as it contains the incarnate Word of God, it is an active way by which the people continually evangelize themselves”⁵². Rather than keeping the people wrapped in a cycle of spiritual and economic poverty, popular piety brings the people back to God by way of their own cultural practices.

Despite a concentrated effort on the part of conservative leaders such as Alfonso López Trujillo and Father Roger Vekemans to appoint hundreds of conservative delegates to the Puebla Conference, popular religion met hearty discussion and subsequent praise. Progressive participants, such as Cardinal Lorscheider of Brazil, helped to balance the heavy representation from conservative Catholics. Out of this dialectic between conservatives and progressives was born a middle way—a praise of popular piety that acknowledged purified forms of traditional practices for their evangelizing power and cultural value.

Allende later re-wrote his sections on popular religion for the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which was released to the public in 1992 following the Second Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1985. While sections 1674-1679 of the Catechism forcefully echos the Puebla Conference, section 1676 directly quotes from the final document of Puebla:

⁵¹ Allende Interview, 2018.

⁵² CELAM, *Documento de Puebla*, n. 450, online:

https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Puebla.pdf (accessed: 01/05/2023).

At its core the piety of the people is a storehouse of values that offers answers of Christian wisdom to the great questions of life. The Catholic wisdom of the people is capable of fashioning a vital synthesis. It creatively combines the divine and the human, Christ and Mary, spirit and body, communion and institution, person and community, faith and homeland, intelligence and emotion. This wisdom is a Christian humanism that radically affirms the dignity of every person as a child of God, establishes a basic fraternity, teaches people to encounter nature and understand work, provides reasons for joy and humor even in the midst of a very hard life. For the people this wisdom is also a principle of discernment and an evangelical instinct through which they spontaneously sense when the Gospel is served in the Church and when it is emptied of its content and stifled by other interests.⁵³

The Puebla Conference not only set a precedent for the evangelizing power of popular piety in Latin America but for the global Church. In the Puebla Conference, popular piety receives an unapologetic affidavit asserting that it is

a legitimate and fundamental expression of the life of the Church and that has, in addition, a process whose evolution was difficult to foresee in the beginnings of the sixties, when the very first voices in defense of the religion of the masses began to emerge⁵⁴.

The Road to Puebla witnessed a great shift in attitude towards expressions of popular piety as a living reality in the Church:

Genuine forms of popular religiosity are incarnate, since they are born of the incarnation of Christian faith in popular culture. For this reason, they entail a personal relationship, not with vague spiritual energies or powers, but with God, with Christ, with Mary, with the saints. These devotions are fleshy, they have a face⁵⁵.

⁵³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1676. See also CELAM, *Third General Conference (Puebla, 1979)*, *Final Document* (NCCB 1979) 448.

⁵⁴ C. JOHANSSON, *Religiosidad popular entre Medellín y Puebla*, 277.

⁵⁵ FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican website, 24 November 2013, online: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, n. 90 (accessed: 01/05/2023).

Pope Francis invokes the same language used in *Evangelii gaudium* to once again affirm the power of evangelization contained within expressions of popular piety in the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*:

A process of inculturation involving not only individuals but also peoples demands a respectful and understanding love for those peoples. This process has already begun in much of the Amazon region. More than forty years ago, the bishops of the Peruvian Amazon pointed out that in many of the groups present in that region, those to be evangelized, shaped by a varied and changing culture, have been “initially evangelized.” As a result, they possess “certain features of popular Catholicism that, perhaps originally introduced by pastoral workers, are now something that the people have made their own, even changing their meaning and handing them down from generation to generation.” Let us not be quick to describe as superstition or paganism certain religious practices that arise spontaneously from the life of peoples. Rather, we ought to know how to distinguish the wheat growing alongside the tares, for “popular piety can enable us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on”⁵⁶.

4. FINAL REFLECTION — THE WAY OF BEAUTY

The effects of the Puebla Conference and its approbation of popular piety reverberate today. In conclusion, I would like to briefly reiterate the remarkable contribution of Joaquín Alliende and Hernán Alessandri, who offered their lived experiences of popular piety from the National Sanctuary of Maipú. Embracing and integrating popular piety is to follow the *Via pulchritudinis*, the Way of Beauty, but not at the expense of the *Via veritatis*, the Way of Truth⁵⁷. The interpolation of popular piety into the body of justice and ethics is not to compromise the commitment to the liberation of the poor, but rather to contribute

⁵⁶ FRANCIS, *Querida Amazonia*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican website, 2 February 2020, online: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html#_ftn111, n. 78 (accessed: 01/05/2023).

⁵⁷ PAUL VI, “Discorso di Paolo VI ai Congressi mariologico e mariano”.

to the fullness of it. We do not need to guard ourselves against critical socio-economic analyses; these types of studies are integral in bringing about social justice. The danger is of the “cold circumspection of purely scientific inquiry,” which must “give way to a new sort of systematics springing from the impulse of desire that dwells at the deepest level of human existence.”⁵⁸ What María Clara Bingemer terms a new sort of systematics is a non-reductionist means of integrating socio-economic analyses with the beauty of popular piety. Scholar Michelle Gonzalez likewise identifies

two interrelated strands of contemporary theology: liberation theologies and theological aesthetics. Some liberation theologians incorporate aesthetic resources in their historical research, uniting their preferential option for the marginalized with an emphasis on aesthetic theological expressions... A hasty interpretation of aesthetics can lead to perceiving its focus as downplaying or obscuring the significance of ethics and social justice. However, emphasis on Beauty does not have to be at the expense of the Good, and can in fact inform one’s commitment to social justice⁵⁹.

In the fight for liberation, “literature, music, and art become theological interlocutors in the recovery of marginalized voices”⁶⁰. Critical socio-economic analyses illuminate the ethical underpinning of a vision of beauty that liberates so that it is not a liberation for one group, but a liberation for all.

The global church of the poor, which naturally perpetuates cycles of evangelization through culture, is like a water-wheel where the drum plunges towards the earth, encounters the fresh water, and bathes itself as it falls again towards the earth. This energy-generating process is much like the life-giving auto-evangelization that the people encounter when they dive into the “living waters to refresh parched

⁵⁸ M. C. BINGEMER, “Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation,” in U. King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis 1994) 311. See also M. A. GONZÁLEZ, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Orbis, Maryknoll 2003) 170.

⁵⁹ M. A. GONZÁLEZ, *Sor Juana*, 154-5.

⁶⁰ M. A. GONZÁLEZ, *Sor Juana*, 154.

hearts” that exists in the substrate of culture⁶¹. In becoming a church for the poor and of the poor, we draw ever closer to God incarnate in the culture in which his Grace already exists. In returning continually to the raw expressions of culture that live vibrantly in the lives of the poor, the Church dips into the well of evangelization that never runs dry.

⁶¹ FRANCIS, *Conclusion of the Synod on the Family 2015*, Vatican website, October 24, 2015, online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151024_sinodo-conclusionone-lavori.html#_ftnref1 (accessed: 01/05/2023): “In the course of this Synod, the different opinions which were freely expressed—and at times, unfortunately, not in entirely well-meaning ways—certainly led to a rich and lively dialogue; they offered a vivid image of a Church which does not simply «rubberstamp», but draws from the sources of her faith living waters to refresh parched hearts.”