

FEBIC Congress 2019

Presentation of Rev. Fidel Oñoro cjm

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ABP: Development and Challenges

There is nothing more beautiful than to watch a child grow.

ABP has been much more than a slogan or a pious proposal. It has had a gestation period which has been embodied in the journey of the Church and which has branched out in an incredible way, with diverse explorations, deepening and concrete experiences. What has occurred in the ecclesial terrain of Latin America is one of these.

Although we have witnessed a marvelous explosion on the five continents, in this presentation let's take a picture only of one which has been a type of proving ground for ABP. It certainly has been taken seriously and there is a path which can be mapped out. ABP in Latin America cannot be understood without its history. And this will be my starting point.

What has occurred in the last 20 years has not been without its perplexities, doubts, anxieties and notable failures as well. The fact is that the search has opened a path. We have seen the Word grow, obviously thanks to the work of the Lord, but also thanks to the work of so many who are convinced that they have done everything possible in order to make the best contribution; be it reflecting on, organizing or accompanying activities, but all focused on the same goal: to implant and help to mature a new form of serving the Word of God in the life and mission of the church and in the heart of our cultures, ABP. Then, following a genetic-evolutionary route, I will pause at some significant experiences which serve us as a basis for observing the growth, becoming conscious of the learnings and pondering the challenges. In this last, the challenges, is what is most interesting at this moment because there is much yet to do. The question is where to place the focus, the energy and the resources.

1. A history

Permit me to briefly mention the landmark moments of this history. In March of 2002 we had a gathering in Quito on this theme, convoked by FEBIC-LAC, under the leadership of our coordinator, Fr. Jesus Antonio Weissensee. It was a

supremely interesting gathering as much for the climate of fraternity of the members of FEBIC-LAC, as for the excellent level and quality of the presentations which tried to decipher what was this ABP. This was the first time that I had heard anyone speak of ABP. The fundamental question was: how to move from a biblical pastoral ministry to a biblical animation of that pastoral ministry? How to move from a multiplicity of parallel activities to a true watering of ecclesial life from the vital sap of the Word as the Council had asked? The first historical marker was the reflections that were presented—that of Sr. Rosana Purga was unforgettable—and those of the members of the FEBIC-LAC as they recounted their first experiences. It was truly very motivating. The concern arose again two years later after a similar gathering in Santiago, Chile.

This moment coincided with the new situation which marked an advance in pastoral ministry in Latin America from the Word of God. In 2003 the bishops representing the 22 Episcopal conferences of Latin America in their Conference which is called CELAM, agreed to give birth to the Center for Biblical Pastoral Ministry Latin America (CEBIPAL). At the invitation of Alexander Schweitzer and then of Gabriel Naranjo, CEBIPAL became a member of FEBIC-LAC and found in it an excellent ally in its foundational stage. It favored a greater articulation by the members of the Federation of the journey of the Latin American

Church which has received an impulse and a particular organization marked by the course taken by the five General Conferences and more than fifty years of ecclesial experiences taken on together.

Both these elements have been important. From 2005 onward, the regional and general gatherings of CEBIPAL and of FEBIC-LAC were made to coincide. The work together was intense, respecting—as was clear—the competencies of each entity. Something precious was put into play: the confidence which generated mutual collaboration. CELAM as much as FEBIC-LAC agreed on the fact that they are entities which bring members into a confederation, they are not normative, but focus on animation, on the search for a shared path and on an interchange of resources to make this possible, which created a favorable environment which permitted creativity to explode and at the same time was opening a furrow to make concrete the implanting of ABP.

Even more, two great ecclesial events returned to favor the impulse. The first, on the level of Latin America, is the V General Conference of our bishops which took place in Aparecida, Brazil (2007), where ABP found full citizenship in the identity of Latin American pastoral ministry (Doc. Aparecida No. 248). The second, the next year, now on the level of the universal Church, the Synod of the Word (2008),

in which the delegates from Latin America proposed to assume ABP at the level of the whole Church (Proposition No. 30), which was finally reflected in No. 73 of the Apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010):

“In this sense, the Synod has issued an invitation to a particular pastoral effort to put back in place the centrality of the Word of God in the life of the Church, making the recommendation <<to increase “biblical pastoral ministry”, not in juxtaposition to other forms of pastoral ministry, but as the *biblical animation of all pastoral ministry*>>”.

Aparecida and *Verbum Domini* incorporated ABP by magisterial mandate. But what can seem as an accomplishment is not a goal achieved but a referent and a pending task at the level of ecclesial structures.

How has the church in Latin America tried this out? The constant question as to how to make it a reality has been the great question for some time now, as one can see. But there is another fact which has awakened a new boiling up of ideas and attempts which were giving substance to ABP in the sphere of the 22 Episcopal Conferences of Latin America.

What has been productive in this respect has been the dialectic between the ecclesial experiences and the search for consensus which has taken place in the meetings. Including, although not always, the things which have been contributed by the base to higher levels. The experiences have helped to reach agreement along common lines and vice versa.

Secondly, some experts have contributed to the draft with the best of their reflection. This same dynamic has taken place at the level of Latin America. Thanks to some countries, such as Mexico, Chile, Brazil and Peru, who were pioneers in elaborating national orientations (or ideologies) destined for the appropriation of the concepts, organizational guidelines and encouragement of concrete activities of ABP.

But this step in Latin America was missing. How did it come about? The building up of a shared vision in Latin America has taken long enough, from 2005 through 2017. First through the gatherings of the four regions of Latin America and the Caribbean (Central America and Mexico; the Caribbean; the Bolivarian Countries; and the Southern Cone).

The successive regional meetings led to three grand Latin American plenary gatherings destined to shape the theme: the first took place in Bogota (2008), the second in Lima (2013) and the third in Quito (2016). Since 2008, the delegates from all the countries, whether from CELAM or from FEBIC-LAC, worked out a shared road map. One of the outstanding points was the work of elaborating some Latin American directions. This didn't happen right away. Sr. Eleana Salas, SDB, together with other expert hands, greatly helped in the birthing of said document, until, at last, in the last gathering promoted by FEBIC-LAC and CEBITEPAL, in Quito in August of 2017, under the leadership of Fr. Guillermo Acero and Mons. Santiago Silva on the part of DELAM, and of Deacon Mike James and Fr. Jan Stefanow on the part of FEBIC-LAC, a text of orientations for Latin America was finally adopted which outlines a concrete form adapted to this specific ecclesial context.

With all this, as incredible as it might seem, it does not appear ABP has been well adopted in Latin America. There is still a long way to go.

It is these challenges to which I will now attend. To confront challenges presupposes responding to a previous question: What have we learned on this journey? What have been the most significant experiences which have been

helpful, and which experiences show that we have been mistaken? Where have we sensed the greater difficulty and even weakness?

2. Axes which have been determinative in the implanting of ABP in Latin America.

I have already given a history, but let's take a little more time. There are three axes which have played a determining role in the implanting of ABP in Latin America.

One, the clarification of the concept.

ABP affirms the place of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church and understands it as "central". What type of centrality?

We can describe it with an example. It comes from Fr. Calos Mesters. He recounted it one night when there was a fraternal gathering of advisors to the Synod of the Word who had come from Latin America. Mesters said that a displacement was taking place as happens in a village. Its inhabitants used to go every day to fetch water from the river that passed by the edge of the town. One

day they saw how the water was beginning to bubble up like a spring in the middle of the plaza.

The Word of God is a fountain in the life and mission of the Church in that she is born from the hearing of the Word. It is what *Dei Verbum* teaches us from its first phrase (DV 1). In our terms we can say that the Word is the protagonist of a new birthing of the Church. As such the Sacred Scripture witnesses to this in its first page and also in the first pages of the mission of the Church in Acts and in Paul (“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing, from the word of Christ”, Rm 10:17). I do not believe that it is an exaggeration to speak of a new birthing of the word.

In this respect, the Council did not teach us to advance from the biblical movement to biblical pastoral ministry, and the resulting journey has made us understand that there is a qualitative jump from biblical pastoral ministry to the biblical animation of all pastoral ministry, of the entire life of the Church and of its mission which is evangelization. It is curious: from the specific (like the car on a train) we move on to the discovery of the overall (all pastoral ministry is biblical) and finally to the source itself. This concept is better understood when it is contrasted with the qualitative jump which also has taken place from pastoral *de conjunto* to an organic pastoral ministry.

How has this taken place in Latin America? We can see it in the five general assemblies of the bishops.

- The first in Rio de Janeiro (1955) caused an awareness of the importance of moving forward together. This was the origin of CELAM .
- The second was Medellín (1968). Thanks to this “being together,” the Latin American conciliar fathers asked themselves how to apply the Council in the specific context of Latin America. *Lumen Gentium* forced them to think about the model of Church and about *Gaudium et Spes* in the relationship Church—Society. The small ecclesial communities placed great importance on a shared reading of the Bible.
- The third in Puebla (1979) witnessed a splendid doctrinal development which produced an organic vision of communion and participation motivated by the hearing of the Word.
- The fourth in Santo Domingo (1992) which affirmed the centrality of Jesus Christ, the Word, and appropriated the paradigm of the new evangelization.
- But it is the last one that has been decisive, in Aparecida (2007). Here I’ll take a bit more time.

By its focus on discipleship and mission. Here is the move forward: the ecclesial subject (Preparatory Doc. No. 40). The problem does not lie with doctrine, nor with the need to form communities, nor with the centrality of Christ the Word. The problem is with the people: the sustainability of faith in the time and diverse situations of life. Why the lack of perseverance? Why the inconsistency between life and faith? The problem currently is something else: it is the subject. Nor has it been considered as it should have been: lack of discipleship, lack of forming the hearer of the Word: forming a Church which is a disciple which discerns its path forward from the Word.

The focus on discipleship offers a new perspective which has a bearing on ABP. In the final document of Aparecida listening to the Word is the starting point of the process of discipleship because the Church is built on the rock of the Word, not the other way around. What is up front turns out to also be what is basic. In the end, the purpose of ABP is to make the church a disciple of its Lord and constantly missionary.

The documents of Aparecida and *Verbum Domini* are examples in this regard. Both are complete exercises of ABP. In the Synod on the Word, in his presentation in the name of the Church of America, Card. Oscar Rodriguez Madarriaga, sought to explain to the Synodal Fathers how the document of Aparecida was effectively an exercise of ABP, it did not have a section on its biblical foundation, rather

everything flowed out of listening to the Word and was the response to discernment conducted with its mediation. Something similar it seems to me can be seen in *Verbum Domini* whose first paragraph states that the purpose of the document is: “to indicate some fundamental guidelines for revaluing the divine Word in the life of Church, source of constant renewal, desiring at the same time that it is every time more the heart of all ecclesial activity” (VD No. 1). This clearly anticipates what will be said in No. 73 about ABP.

(He singled out the recent dissertation of Cesar Buitrago, “The sourcing of Sacred Scripture in light of the New Evangelization: A Study of the Biblical Animation of Pastoral Ministry, Montevideo 2018).

Two, ABP finds its work in the “pastoral conversion” of the Church.

Here we pass from the “what” to the “why”. “Pastoral conversion” is a key concept in Aparecida and has a close relationship with ABP. What is interesting is that it also became part of the universal magisterium by means of the Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*” of Pope Francis (2013).

Three, the stimulus for the implantation of ABP from significant experiences.

Beside the “what” and the “why,” there has always been present the question of the “how”. Among the different initiatives which have been taken up, permit me to lay out briefly seven “significant experiences”.

- (1) The annual course/workshop which began to take place in 2007 for agents working to multiply ABP in the 22 Episcopal Conferences of Latin America. Its length is three weeks in Bogota. This same course/workshop began to be replicated in other groups of bishops, since that was its purpose. But it should be pointed out that in Chile, Sra. Katuska Caceres, who was the leader of this course/workshop, implemented it with a true specialization from the office of ABP in the Archdiocese of Santiago, Chile. It is one of the most notable model experiences.
- (2) Since 2005 two annual courses on biblical updating and biblical animation of pastoral ministry. One was directed to the Bishops of Latin American (each year there were 40 participants) and the annual renewal course for professors of Sacred Scripture of universities and major seminaries in Latin America. It took place with the fraternal support of Fr. Santiago Guijarro for four years, from 2005 to 2009. An important aspect of all these gatherings was to work with the professor on the correlation between academia and pastoral ministry.
- (3) A model of ABP was put into play inside CELAM. During the four years following the Assembly at Aparecida (2007-2011), and applying No. 248 of the document, CEBIPAL coordinated with all the offices of pastoral

ministry activities for the implementation of ABP. In this way all the areas of Organic Pastoral Ministry in Latin America articulated from CELAM entered into dialogue to achieve collaboration with its center of biblical animation. A special place was given to ABP in the design of the continental mission which Aparecida had requested.

- (4) Another channel for implanting ABP was the promotion of Lectio Divina and the popular reading of the Bible. This was done in three ways: (a) During the five following years CEBIPAL offered weekly input for all the bishops of Latin America, following the pedagogy of the liturgical year, in order to situate themselves in a hearing of the Word. (b) In some local churches there were workshops in formation for Lectio Divina in such a way that they were taken up in all the areas of pastoral ministry. (c) From that point on a new custom began: that every one of the ecclesial events begin with Lectio Divina in such a way that all ecclesial concerns and all pastoral activities might be a response to listening to the Word. This was implemented in all the gatherings of CELAM, as a form of teaching. From that point the custom has been replicated in the gatherings of the different Episcopal Conferences, in the Assemblies of Pastoral Ministry of the Dioceses, in gatherings of clergy and at the beginning of a every pastoral event.

(5) A particular activity has been an experience for youth and children. For youth the program entitled “Lectionautas” was implemented which echoes the letter of Pope Benedict XVI to youth to make the Word of God the compass of their journey through life. Workshops were conducted in 18 countries, benefiting more than 300,000 youth. This program was made possible thanks to the financial aid of the United Biblical Societies and the leadership and logistical support of Mr. Ricardo Grzona. Simultaneously, and only because of the resources of CEBIPAL, another program was offered with similar characteristics destined for children in catechesis for First Communion, for Missionary Childhood and pastoral ministry for children, entitled “Discipulitos”. The latter only lasted for two years but it managed to reach some 800,000 children, according to the statistics given by the distributors of the materials on our website.

(6) In collaboration with the Latin American Organization of Seminaries (OSLAM), workshops like those of the Lectionautas, but destined for future priests were held in 12 countries. The seminarian delegates from each seminary committed themselves to repeat the workshop in their respective house of formation.

(7) It has been part of a great number of ecclesial events (pastoral assemblies, local synod, retreats or ongoing formation courses for clergy) in which guidance has been given for the implantation of ABP.

This is only a sample of significant activities, not all of them. What I want to place before you is how the circumstances which I laid out in my initial report favored an appropriation of ABP in Latin America which really is only a first stage.

And it is only a first step because we are not able to say that the whole world has assumed ABP both in its concept and in its pastoral dynamics, in the way we would like. Along the way we have met with difficulties. Among them I will point out three and I ask forgiveness for the sincerity with which I am going to refer to them.

The first is the resistance in some sectors of the church to understand the centrality of the Word. I'll give an example.

The second is the lack of confidence and fear before what is arising from the fact that listening to the Word teaches one how to think, how to contrast and how to speak to communities. Obviously, critiques arise and sometimes they collide with clerical attitudes which still dominate in the pastoral world. To journey with others and to work as a team in a spirit of fraternity overcoming authoritarianism is always complicated.

A third, and it is in historical reality, has been the difficult transition which has taken place both in the Biblical Center of CELAM as well as in the coordination of FEBIC-LAC at the beginning of this decade, to the point of generating a certain crisis and including a cooling of the initial impulse; I am referring to the difficulty of obtaining changes in the leadership. This is happily being overcome, but it has held back the initial impulse.

3. The challenges to an open path.

Finally, this development of APB which we are attending to leads us to perceive some challenges. Certainly, there are many more, but here permit me to name five:

The first challenge: to promote an ABP which continues to learn how to journey together in a plurality.

There are three tendencies to rupture which must be confronted:

- a. Between the academic world and the pastoral world.
- b. Between more open models of the church and others which are more conservative.
- c. Between integrated leaderships and personalized ones (including territorial).

Along this line it would be interesting if we intensified more the flow of support, in intense collaboration. I want to say greater interchange of resources. A few years ago, we were dreaming about a type of “Biblicists without borders “-

The second challenge: To promote an ABP which is more prophetic, at the service of the renewal of the church as people of God on the move and facing the new calls and interpolations which the world reality is now making.

The third challenge: an ABP which helps to take on the direction of being disciple-like. This means to move from biblical knowledge to biblical processes. The Bible is full of itineraries. And what is important is the formation of the people of God and their being put into motion in fidelity to the plan of the Lord. We need to teach how to read the Bible from this perspective as soon as possible.

“Disciple-like” means that the word grows with me, with every person and community. “Disciple-like” means that the Word is present in each of the stages of the rainbow of life with a certain continuity and each time with greater depth, in light of the maturation of the faith. “Disciple-like” means that we constantly proclaim who is the Lord who guides the Church and that ours is to follow him, together with our pastors, from a listening which is profound, transformative and committed.

The fourth challenge: an ABP which educates in personal and ecclesial discernment. I'm thinking about the allegory of the Good Shepherd, where to hear the voice of the Shepherd and to follow him implies also to distinguish and to leave on the side, with a critical conscience, the seductive voices which do not go away. Consequently, on one hand, a church which forms adult sons, capable of choosing communally in obedience to the gospel new steps in each stage of history. On the other hand, ABP is a better contribution to a more synodal church.

5th challenge: formation. Perhaps I should have begun here. I perceive on one or the other side what is the most urgent cry. The people are thirsty for the Word, but just any service of the Word is not a response. The people of God are simple, but they are not stupid; the people ask for quality and seriousness in the service of the Word, not cookies but real bread which nourishes, not news about the latest new exegetical things but a response to their questions and vital necessities, which is precisely the reason for which the Word of God exists.

As incredible as it might seem, one must return to literacy. It is surprising in this world that is so advanced, that we don't know how to read. And I'm referring not only to recognizing letters and capturing ideas, but to knowing how to read life, to perceive the paths of the Spirit in all the things that are happening; better said, to read life from the Word and the Word from life. Along this same line we are urged

to give significant attention to the hermeneutics, a way of reading the Bible which surpasses not only fundamentalisms but also relativisms.

In the final instance, the hearing of the Word of God which the points to formation in Christ in every believer and every community.

4. In conclusion....

Esteemed members of this great Congress of FEBIC: it's interesting to observe that what originally was a proposal one day in a small reflection in southern Europe, with the aid of Santiago Guijarro, Tom Osborn, and others, has had enormous repercussions. In what I have experienced, I can testify that it certainly has marked in a profound way the journey of the Latin American church. It's interesting how a proposal moved from a specialized area to an ample pastoral terrain which gave it a decided and beneficial perception. And from Latin America it has become the patrimony, not of a group, nor of a continent, but of the universal church.

But I must say, we are still before a work in the making. The development shows us that we are in the middle of the journey and at best in some or other part at the beginning of the journey. As we have seen, there are learnings which have been achieved and many more which lie ahead. But what counts, and forgive me the insistence, is in the first place the willingness to travel together, to create a shared school and to offer a hand in brotherhood to each other without jealousies.

I began with the image of a child who is growing up. It's with this same image that I end. I have the impression that, at least in Latin America, as happens when a child is growing up its clothing gets too small. And even more, it requires a greater investment, it gives you more problems and even demands a change of attitude. Something like this is happening. It's possible that the old solutions are no longer useful. We must rethink ourselves creatively. ABP itself asks us to plant ourselves anew.

Translation by Gary Riebe-Estrella, S.V.D.

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