"Solidarity as the Fruit of Communio: Ecclesia in America, 'Post-Liberation Theology,' and the Earth"

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Peter Casarella

The hermeneutical key to the apostolic exhortation is very clearly “the encounter with the living Jesus Christ.” None of what follows about communion and solidarity makes any sense without the reality of the encounter as both real presence and transformative experience.

I. The Difficult Task of Grasping the Central Message of Ecclesia in America

“So stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming.”\(^1\) These words taken from the gospel acclamation were cited in November 1997 by Pope John Paul II at the opening homily of the Synod of America. Their importance was underscored by their repetition in the closing remarks of the same homily:

Truly, dear brothers and sisters, these times invite us to stay awake. We must stay awake and pray, recalling that one day we will appear before the Son of Man as pastors of the Church on the American continent.\(^3\)

By evoking a deliberately eschatological horizon in the Synod’s opening Mass, the pope highlighted the *kairos* of the Synod’s commencement. The Synod began five years after both the fifth centenary of the first evangelization of the American continent and the pope’s exhortation to the bishops assembled in Santo Domingo to initiate a new evangelization. In addition, the opening homily came at the precipice of celebrating the antepenultimate Advent season before the Jubilee year 2000. The homily’s eschatological tone is not meant to “dramatize” what has otherwise been referred to as the convening of the Catholic Church’s “senior management” from North and South America.\(^3\) The Holy Father speaks rather of the real possibility that the event of the Synod could pass without due attention being paid to the importance of the moment.

The importance of the moment is not just strategic. Well aware of rapidly emerging trends towards a global economy, transnational migration, cultural exchange, whole-scale political corruption, as well as the likelihood that half of the global Catholic Church will be Spanish-speaking within a generation, the pope signals instead the contrast between the permanence of God’s word and the passing shadows of the world.\(^4\) His point, of course, is not to shun the accelerated pace of *saeculum* but to


\(^4\) Opening Homily, 415: “‘Sky and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.’ [Mt 13:31] The shadow of the world passes away, but the word of God will not pass away. How eloquent the contrast is! God does not pass away and what comes from him does not pass away. Christ’s sacrifice, which we read about today in the Letter of the Hebrews, does not pass away: Jesus ‘has offered one single sacrifice for sins’ (10:12); and again, ‘by virtue of that one single offering, he has achieved the eternal perfection of all who are sacrificed’ (10:14).”
discern precisely therein the possibility of re-dedicating the Christian community to conversion, evangelization, and new bonds of solidarity. In short, the urgency of the Synod is more than a matter of getting out the right message. He urges the bishops rather to assess the real prospects of unified and revitalized Christian life “from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego” (the pope’s phrase) as a prolongation of God’s dramatic entrance into history two millennia ago in the person of Jesus Christ.

While the pope called upon the Synod participants to stay awake, the published interventions from the Synod and, a fortiori, the soporific manner in which commentators on the apostolic exhortation have treated its all too numerous policy proposals make one’s eyes glaze over. The apostolic exhortation (and presumably the Synod itself) addresses enough hotly contested political, economic, and ecclesial proposals to sound a bit like a party platform. How then are we to read the document? Are we to read it in terms of the encounter of time and eternity or as a desperate attempt to provide “a diversified strategy” that lays out “the Church’s plan of action for the next millennium?”

There is no doubt that the exhortation, like the Synod itself, is filled with many concrete proposals that require immediate attention. Imagine what would happen if all the proposals contained in Ecclesia in America were enacted overnight. When we woke up tomorrow morning, there would be no more economic disparity between North and South, no more political corruption, and no arms race. External debts would no longer be burdensome. There would be no more illegal drug trade. Abortion, euthanasia, and the sexual abuse of children would disappear. There would no longer be damage done to the environment, and there would be no discrimination against women, indigenous peoples, African Americans, and the elderly. The crisis in priestly vocations would be eliminated, and the youth in America would not be frustrated and alienated. There would be no more antagonism between Catholics, Pentecostals, and Evangelicals, and the conflicts regarding immigration would cease. I am not cataloguing these issues to make the pope and the Synod Fathers seem quixotic but rather to suggest that there must be some, more convincing way to view the document than as a disjointed set of policy proposals.

I think it equally fruitless to try to define the “theological core” of the apostolic exhortation. The threefold subtitle of the document already attests to the interlocking agendas of seeking conversion, communion, and solidarity. To reduce these three themes to just one is shortsighted. Likewise, any attempt to separate the call for spiritual renewal from the social dimensions of the document is going to fail as miserably as attempts by liberals or conservatives to pick up their pet projects and tout them as the sole fruits of the Synod. This essay is intended to initiate a discussion about the relationship between the three tasks identified in the subtitle. In particular, I will attempt to clarify the terms communion and solidarity in the post-Synodal exhortation and their relation. In the process I hope to uncover some of the foundational insights in Ecclesia in America regarding the relationship between faith, culture, and public life in America. Thereby an initial response can be given to the contention of Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete that the pope’s purpose in the document is to give voice to the “post-liberation theology” (Albacete’s term) that has been developing in Latin America for the past twenty years.

Some guidance in these uncharted waters is provided by the brief, but densely packed Synodal intervention of the then Archbishop Francis George of Chicago. Archbishop George noted the sharp difference between the religious matrix of post-sixteenth century Christianity in North and South America. He contended that even when there are common bonds in the Catholic Church, the relationship between faith and culture among natively Hispanic Catholics is much stronger than among their nominal “co-religionists” from the North. Catholics in North

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6Cf. Sebastián Mier, “La Exhortación Ecclesia in America, a Luz del Reino de Dios,” Christus 711 (Marzo-Abril 1999): 37: “... el documento aborda muchos temas, y no establece claramente prioridades entre ellos, por lo que se puede tener la sensación de perderse en el bosque.”

7This last point was shrewdly anticipated and clearly articulated by Mary Ann Glendon in her Synodal intervention. See Mary Ann Glendon, “Overcoming Obstacles to Solidarity with the Poor,” Origins 27, no. 26 (11 December 1997), 431-32.


America are willy-nilly the servants of “a Puritan God [who] can give laws adequate for creating a society” even though culture in a fully human sense demands more. While acknowledging the ecumenical openness of the North as a legitimate gain, the future Cardinal George also posits that culturally Catholic Latin Americans are not afflicted by the anti-sacramental sensibilities of the Calvinist North. “I do not believe it is the will of God,” George opines, “that the terrible divisions that so weaken the force of the gospel among English-speaking Christians should be visited in our generation upon Spanish-speaking Christians.”

George envisions a new Catholic apologetics that will respond to the growing secularization of the Hispanic and Anglo middle classes throughout the continent and at the same time provide ecumenically viable but cogent responses to the proselytizers exploiting the current Catholic malaise at all levels of society.

According to Cardinal George, a key ingredient in the new apologetics is a proper understanding of the relationship between ecclesial communion and social solidarity:

Communion is a supernatural gift that presupposes grace and union with the Holy Spirit. It is initiated with faith and expressed sacramentally in the Church. . . . Solidarity is a human virtue, “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good . . . because we are all really responsible for all.”

Cardinal George’s point is crucial but easily misunderstood. He distinguishes clearly in order to unite, for there is a distinction between ecclesial communion and social solidarity but no separation. When social bonds evince Christian dimensions of gratuity, forgiveness, and reconciliation, then solidarity spills over into communion. The supernatural gift of communion, by the same token, can inspire and/or lend support to a model of social solidarity, as was the case with the predominantly Catholic trade union movement in Poland in the 1980s. Maintaining the proper distinction between the two is, however, key. When communion is reduced to solidarity, then the Church’s mission represents nothing but high-minded and pious plans for social amelioration.

It, alternatively, the communion of the Church were to be plied as a substitute for social solidarity, then, George avers, “ecclesial hegemony over civil society” results. The establishment of tangible bonds in America more durable than the thinly privatistic cords of voluntary choice requires more than yet another program for merging institutional realities in the North and South. Beyond policy proposals and institutional good will, the real causes of the separation of faith and culture need to be addressed. We turn now to the document Ecclesia in America to explore the underlying notions of communion and solidarity found there.

II. Solidarity as the Fruit of Communion: The Relationship between Communion and Solidarity in Ecclesia in America

One of the first substantive instances in which the terms communion and solidarity are employed in the document occurs in the paragraph in which the pope defends the innovative use of the term “America” as the title of the Synod:

The decision to speak of “America” in the singular was an attempt to express not only the unity which in some way already exists, but also to point to that closer bond which the peoples of the continent seek and which the Church wishes to foster as part of her own mission, as she promotes the communion of all in the Lord.

This decision met with a mixed reaction since cynics claimed either outdated cartography or a utopian desire to paper over the cultural and economic chasm between North and South. On the other hand, the very language of a “Synod on America” (in the singular) speaks volumes, for it enjoins the many local churches “from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego” to face the task of overcoming manifold disparities, differences, prejudices, and misconceptions. Such is the nature of genuine communion.

The hermeneutical key to the apostolic exhortation is very clearly “the encounter with the living Jesus Christ.” None of what follows about communion and solidarity makes any sense without the reality of the encounter as both real presence and transformative experience. The pope cites the Samaritan woman, the tax collector Zaccheus, Mary Magdalene (the apostola apostolorum), the disciples of Emmaus, and Saul, the future apostle to the Gentiles, as paradigmatic instances of life changing.

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10Ibid., 420.
11Ibid. The reference for the first statement is, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church as Communion,” (28 May 1992) and for the second Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 38.
12Cf. EIA, 27.
13EIA, 5.
encounters with Jesus. Such encounters, it is noted, are only
infrequently one-on-one and more often communal and sacra-
mental in nature (no. 9). 14

A further clarification of the ecclesial nature of the
encounter draws out the trinitarian dimensions of the experience:

The Church is the place where men and women, by encountering Jesus, can
come to know the love of the Father, for whoever has seen Jesus has seen the
Father (cf. Jn 14:9). After his Ascension into heaven, Jesus acts through the
powerful agency of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete (cf. Jn. 16:17), who transforms
believers by giving them new life. (no. 10)

The outpouring gift of the Father’s love revealed in the Son and
through the agency of the Holy Spirit is shared by those trans-
formed by their encounter with the triune God. When we are told
that Jesus Christ is the “definitive answer” to the fundamental
questions troubling women and men on the American continent,
the dialogue of question and answer should be understood in a
trinitarian rather than a narrowly individualistic fashion.
Trinitarian communion is not individualistic, nor merely commu-
nitarian, and certainly not a “hybrid” of the two. 15 In other words,
the bounty of an outward flowing communion of love bursts the
boundaries of a narrow, privatistic faith in Jesus as a personal
Lord and savior without sanctioning coercive methods for
evangelization and re-evangelization. Here is also where Ecclesia
in America addresses in a trinitarian manner the antinomy
identified above by Francis George between the rule-oriented
individualism of the North and the sacramental and communal
experience of the South.

Some readers of Ecclesia in America will see the references
to Our Lady of Guadalupe in the document as a politically
expedient use of “folkloric” images. In my opinion, the appearance
of the mestiza face of the Virgin of Tepeyac (and the concomitant
call to celebrate her feast throughout the continent on December

12th) is one with the theme of trinitarian communion sketched
above. Through her intercession, Juan Diego was brought into
communion with the Lord’s healing Spirit. Nuestra Señora de
Guadalupe offered concrete hope and guidance in the ways of the Lord
to those who were mistreated, outcast, and otherwise
deprived of their dignity during the first evangelization. 17

What binds conversion, communion, and solidarity? The
“call to conversion” is described as urgent and closely connected
to “fraternal communion, because it enables us to understand that
Christ is the head of the Church, his Mystical Body” (no. 26).
Conversion is tied to “solidarity, because it makes us aware that
whatever we do for others, especially for the poorest, we do for
Christ himself” (ibid.). The urgency of conversion in the apostolic
exhortation echoes the words of the opening homily at the Synod.
Here too the kairos of conversion is poised at a critical and
dramatic juncture in history—between the fifth centenary of
America’s first evangelization and the celebration of the third
millennium of Christianity. Here too conversion is likened to being
roused forcefully from a tranquil sleep: “Christ’s call to conversion
finds an echo in the words of the Apostle: ‘It is time now to wake
from sleep, because our salvation is closer than when we first
became believers’ (Rom. 13:11).” 18 The so-called path to conversion,
especially in its social, political, and sacramental dimensions (e.g.,
penance!), is not presented as a new “great awakening” of a select
group of Christians. There is no question of the Church relying
mainly on the witness of highly charismatic recent additions.
Cradle Catholics especially are challenged to testify in word and
in deed to the profound “change of mentality” (the document’s
rendering into English of metanoia) that results from the encounter
with the living Jesus Christ (cf. no. 28).

The specific form of communion to which we are led
through (ongoing) conversion is the trinitarian communion of
the Church: “We must proclaim that this communion is the magnifi-
cent plan of God the Father; that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate
Lord, is the heart of this communion, and that the Holy Spirit works
ceaselessly to create communion and to restore it when it is
broken” (no. 33). This theology of communion is not abstract.
Visibly disclosed long ago through Juan Diego, it can also be

14 All internal references are to EIA.
15 Paul D. Minnihan refers to the “hybrid between individual and
communal/cultural encounters” in his article “Encountering the American
Synod,” Theological Studies 60 (December 1999): 603. “From the outset,”
Minnihan states, “this fusion points Christians toward a standard of self-
awareness” (ibid.). Minnihan’s article is in some respects quite
comprehensive (e.g. the elucidating comparison of the apostolic exhortation
with the pre-Synodal instrumentum laboris) but never once mentions the
trinitarian basis of communion.

16 EIA, 11.
17 See Virgil Elizondo, Guadalupe: Mother of a New Creation (Maryknoll,
N.Y.: Orbis, 1997).
18 EIA, 26.
realized today through communal prayer, closer relations between episcopal conferences, fraternal ties between parishes, and communication among pastoral workers with a view to specific missionary tasks. By the same token, the entire College of Bishops is visibly strengthened and united by the Petrine ministry of the pope acting as Vicar of Christ (ibid.). The sacraments of Initiation, especially when combined with the proper catechesis of the participants, complete the process whereby the faithful are drawn into communion of life in the Church (no. 34). The Eucharist is the center of communion with God and with each other because it is the "outstanding moment of encounter with the living Christ" (no. 35). The document explicitly links an active, conscious participation in the communion of Christ’s body with "an invitation to solidarity, expressing the Lord’s command: ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (Jn. 13:34)” (ibid.). The visible Eucharistic realities of sacrifice, communion, and the presence of the Lord must lead to a more fervent exercise of charity. By its very nature, eucharistic communion requires each participant in it to share the immense gift of love that he or she receives.

The tasks of communion specified in Ecclesia in America are numerous. These include: closer ties with the Eastern Catholic Churches, the fostering of vocations, especially among indigenous peoples, renewal of parish life, strengthening of the permanent diaconate and the consecrated life, lending support to the leadership roles of the laity in society and in the Church, promoting the dignity of women, especially among the poor, and ministry to youth. In numerous dioceses of the continent, some of these items would have arisen spontaneously in diocesan planning sessions. One item, however, that appears as a distinct outcome of this particular Synodal gathering is the call for a deeper communion in the form of inter-American gatherings of the particular Churches (no. 37). Through the bishops and bishops’ conferences, parishes and dioceses across the continent could intensify collaborative work on a host of pivotal issues, especially those affecting the poor.

To summarize, communion is therefore predicated upon conversion and issues in real bonds of solidarity. The three themes cited in the subtitle of the apostolic exhortation are thus closely interrelated. The specific form of interrelation between the three realities could be seen as the perichoresis or interpenetration of conversion, communion, and solidarity. Unless one recognizes the interlocking dimensions of each task, there will be a deep misunderstanding of the integral view of the human person and of the integral view of human liberation articulated in this document. For example, solidarity is already shaped by both conversion and communion. Solidarity is both closely related to and distinct from conversion. As already noted, the document underscores the social dimensions of conversion. No less important, however, is

to understand correctly the relationship between the political community and the Church, and to distinguish clearly between what individual believers or groups of believers undertake in their own name as citizens guided by Christian conscience and what they do in the name of the Church in communion with their Pastors (no. 27).

This caveat is not intended to weaken the social and political message of the document, but it does confirm what Cardinal George said in his Synodal intervention about the difference between the horizontal concept of solidarity and the vertical dimensions of ecclesial communion. Conversion to the Lord is therefore distinct from having one’s political consciousness raised even though conversion is not thereby rendered apolitical. 20

20Minnihan characterizes the presentation of conversion in EIA, chapter 3, “as a doctrinal reflection” and notes here the absence of “firm action items.” (“Encountering the American Synod”: 609.) “What at first glimpse may appear an impoverishment within the exhortation, its failure to articulate an action plan for conversion,” he continues, “may prove to be a contextual and intercontextual goldmine” (ibid., 610). The concern that this putative “doctrine” of conversion is perhaps too theoretical miscasts the authentic and novel relationship between theory and practice at play in the document. As already noted, the pope states explicitly that “conversion leads to fraternal communion, because it enables us to understand that Christ is the head of the Church,” and “[conversion] urges solidarity, because it makes us aware that whatever we do for others, especially for the poorest, we do for Christ himself.” (EIA, 26. Italics added.) Conversion, in other words, is not accomplished in abstraction from concrete ways of acting, nor are the concrete ways of acting that issue from conversion intelligible without the self-giving reality of Christ’s life. Conversion, according to John Paul II, “is not simply a matter of thinking differently in an intellectual sense, but of revising the reasons behind one’s actions in the light of the gospel” (ibid.). Minnihan therefore rightly insists that the strategies for fostering conversion may take different forms in different American contexts but wrongly suggests the virtual absence of a plan of action. Conversion is
What about the relationship between communion and solidarity? The themes of communion and solidarity are already closely intertwined in the ecclesiology of communion itself. The form of ecclesial communion, while incorporating and being animated by hierarchical elements such as the Petrine ministry of preserving unity in the faith, is not conceived in a static or ahistorical manner. Ecclesial communion in America carries with it concrete tasks for building greater solidarity within the Church and in the world. The intrinsic, trinitarian sacramentality of communion mandates an opening up of the Church’s interior life of prayer in such a manner as to lend a tangible sense of unity to the American continent. To this end, the Holy Father cites a proposition adopted at the conclusion of the Synod: “It is important that the Church throughout America be a living sign of reconciled communion, an enduring appeal to solidarity, and a witness ever present in our various political, economic, and social systems” (no. 32, citing Propositio 33).

What is the new path to solidarity in Ecclesia in America? Solidarity is defined in the document as “the fruit of communion” (no. 52). This highly trinitarian and Johannine definition, taken from Propositio no. 67 of the Synod, gives the impression of breaking new ground. For example, it is not included in the detailed discussion of solidarity in the “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation” issued in 1986 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Communion with Christ and with our brothers and sisters leads to the service of our neighbors in all their needs, material and spiritual. There is no hint here of functionalizing spiritual communion for the purpose of fostering social welfare. Rather than yoking ecclesial communion to a particular social or economic program, the relationship between solidarity and communion is intrinsic and organic:

Solidarity is thus the fruit of the communion which is grounded in the mystery of the triune God, and in the Son of God who took flesh and died for all. It is expressed in Christian love which seeks the good of others, especially of those most in need. (no. 52, citing Propositio 67)

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22 Cf. no. 29 of ELA on the ongoing importance of the contemplative life and monastic vocations.

In other words, since ecclesial communion is already formed by the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the sharing of this gift of communion with the world cannot but be an outward expression of the very same self-gift. Communion is always already a reciprocal sharing of persons, and the blossoming of the tree of communion must yield fruit that bears characteristics of its trinitarian root and branches.

The document furthermore states that “taking the gospel as its starting point, a culture of solidarity needs to be promoted ...” (ibid.). The culture of solidarity will invest itself with specific proposals for the reform of the social and economic order, yet not by accommodating itself to purely social and economic ways of interpreting human existence. This point is not just theoretical. Two of the most important practical initiatives mentioned are the solidarity with refugees “forced to leave their villages and lands in order to flee violence” and the critique of economic systems—termed “neoliberalism” in the document—that are based solely upon the parameters of profit and the law of the market (no. 56).

Fierce debate at and after the Synod has attended these proposals, particularly the latter one. If the Church is going to be effective in carrying out these mandates, then it will certainly need to engage those enterprises that are fostering micro-economic growth in particular communities of oppressed peoples in the poorest parts of the continent as well as to continue to lend its material support to refugees throughout the continent. However, addressing such quotidian exigencies—no matter how pressing—is in fact fruitless if these efforts are divorced from the task of building a trinitarian (i.e., self-disclosive and self-emptying) view of human culture. The Church’s effort to evangelize the culture is not something that is done in addition to its commitment to social solidarity. Social solidarity requires as its first principle the promotion of the inalienable dignity of the human person (no. 57). The commitment to the poor, oppressed, and weakest members of society is not added as a supplement to a pre-existing and self-sufficient conception of man as a highly productive member of the social network (homo faber). Because the view of the person is intrinsically trinitarian from the outset, the commitment to those on the margins and the promotion of human dignity are cut from the same cloth.

One of the surprising outcomes of the Synod was the shared consensus between bishops in North and South America on the question of political corruption. The document states that the phenomenon of corruption is widespread in America and the Church can effectively help to eradicate this evil from civil society by making people more aware of the Church’s social doctrine. While not without precedent, the close tie between the elimination of political corruption and the call for debt relief is one of the most innovative proposals in the whole document. It is tempting to view this kind of conclusion purely in terms of the social ethics of civil society, yet even on this point the fostering of civic virtues is related to the trinitarian values of self-offering and mutual surrender. The level of corruption in some quarters is quite intense. The only way that the Church will succeed in arguing for debt relief and restoring a sense of economic justice between North and South will be through a fundamental catechesis of all peoples. Such catechesis will need to reflect the trinitarian view of the person called to serve the common good of society rather than self-promotion and self-interest.

III. “Post-Liberation” Theology in Ecclesia in America

Can one speak of a “post-liberation theology,” as Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete has provocatively proposed on the editorial page of the New York Times, or even any form of political theology in the document? The foregoing analysis of the terms conversion, communion, and solidarity yields two, distinct answers to this question. First, the pope articulates a basic distinction between trinitarian communion and social solidarity. This distinction appears in paragraph no. 27, which states that “[t]he Church which... can in no way be confused with the political community nor tied to any political system, is both a sign and safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person,” but the distinction is also operative elsewhere in the document. Some commentators on the Synodal deliberations interpret this

24Cf. Archbishop Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga, “Solidarity in America—The Church, the Poor, and Social Reform,” Cardinal Dearden Lecture delivered on 23 March 1999 at The Catholic University of America. The text of this address is available on the following website: http://www.acad.cua.edu/pbaf/speeches/rodriguez99.htm.

25See n. 8 above.

26Richard John Neuhaus, Appointment in Rome, 142–44, here at 144.


28Cf. Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation, 81, in which cultural transformation is inextricably tied to socioeconomic liberation.

Church in America Awakening. The book offers an engaging account of the Synodal sessions as well as a theological interpretation that presumed certain implied results of these discussions. Fr. Neuhaus’ book met with the severe criticism of Mark and Louise Zwick in *The Houston Catholic Worker* because in their view Neuhaus’s overarching interpretation of the Synod fell into precisely the same form of Calvinist voluntarism that Francis George had decried at the outset of the Synod.  

Neuhaus stresses the continuity between the task of a new evangelization and the Second Vatican Council’s vision of the Church in the modern world as interpreted through the lens of John Courtney Murray’s claim that “pluralism has been written into the script of history.”  

The sub-text for advocating the pluralistic context of the new evangelization is Fr. Neuhaus’ longstanding and highly laudable work on behalf of fostering better ecumenical relations between Catholics and evangelical Protestants in both North and South America, known in this country as “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT). The apostolic exhortation does acknowledge “bonds of true though imperfect communion” with these communities but also condemns all forms of proselytism, whether these efforts are initiated by Catholics, Pentecostals, or mainline Protestants. By adopting a theologically “pluralist” reading of the pope’s call for evangelization, Neuhaus paints a picture somewhat rosier than the apostolic exhortation of the opportunities for dialogue between parties that are otherwise contesting for the attention of disenfranchised Hispanics in both North and South. The new evangelization and the ongoing need to promote Christian unity are thoroughly compatible, but *Ecclesia in America* confirms that ecumenism is no excuse for ignoring the radical social witness that comes from communion.

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30 Mark and Louise Zwick, “Pope John Paul II’s New America,” *Houston Catholic Worker* 19, no. 2 (March-April 1999), 4.
33 According to an unpublished manuscript written by the Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the linking of koinonia ecclesiology and its implications for missiological and social solidarity in EIA may be stronger than in some of the ecumenical texts. (See Brother Jeffrey Gros, F.S.C., “Ecumenism in the Western Hemisphere: Koinonia in America,” 11.)
34 The critique of neo-liberal economic policies is found in *EIA*, 56 and reads as follows: “More and more, in many countries of America, a system known as ‘neoliberalism’ prevails; based on a purely economic conception of man, this system considers profit and the law of the market as its only parameters, to the detriment of the dignity of and the respect due to individuals and peoples.” Neuhaus discusses this in *Appointment in Rome*, 71. To his credit Neuhaus highlights several ventures in Latin American “grassroots capitalism” that were announced at the Synod as well as the pope’s qualified defense of the free market’s creation of wealth in *Centesimus Annus*; nonetheless, the overall dismissal of the Synodal critique of economic neoliberalism by Neuhaus seems to prejudice what later was to emerge in the apostolic exhortation.
in the trinitarian communion and emanates from the gift of the Spirit shared outwardly from the Father's offering of his only Son for the sake of the world. Some refer to this form of evangelization as "eucharistic" because of the connection between the Son's self-offering in praise to the Father and the sacrifice that God offers in the sacrament. Likewise, the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe is not just symbolic but a living example of how in the Church in America the self-emptying love of the Spirit of Jesus Christ can transform structural relations in society from within and bring a message of Christian hope to those who are undergoing desperate conditions of oppression.

Before concluding the analysis of the exhortation per se, I would like to consider two examples from contemporary Catholic theology of how communion and solidarity are related to one another. Each also conceives of an evangelization of culture and society through an encounter with the trinitarian and eucharistic shedding of Christ's kenotic love. Both Hans Urs von Balthasar and Gustavo Gutiérrez develop a eucharistic and christological foundation for the new evangelization. Together I think that these two approaches lend support to Msgr. Albacete's remark that Ecclesia in America gives an impetus to what could be termed "post-liberation theology."

The notion of Christ's solidarity with all the dead is developed in Hans Urs von Balthasar's Mysterium Paschale. According to Balthasar, the experience of Christ when he descended to the realm of the dead on Holy Saturday is the perfect, visible form of God's incarnate, kenotic love. Christ's descent represents an unsubtractable element in the Christian narrative, one which gives decisive shape to the message of redemption and emancipation implicit within the gospel itself. Balthasar discovers in Christ's solidarity with the dead the concrete task of hoping for a universal salvation that exceeds human comprehension.

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38Balthasar's interpretation of the Holy Saturday event has been endorsed by the German political theologian Johannes Baptist Metz in, Faith in History and Society (New York: Crossroad, 1980).
According to *Ecclesia in America*, the Paschal mystery is “the supreme manifestation of the infinite God within the finitude of history” (no. 70). By the same token, the descent into the realm of the dead unites the universal scope of God’s effectiveness in history with the highly particular redemptive activity of the Godman Jesus of Nazareth. The effects of the Word’s mission from the Father to the dead are unified in the return of the dead human soul of Christ to the Father in the Paschal Mystery. As a result of the ineffable union between Christ’s human soul in the realm of the dead and the Father that he has left behind, the particularities of a soteriologically singular effective history never become separated from the unsurpassably redemptive hope that history will be fulfilled in the Father’s will to save everyone and have them come to know the truth (1 Tm 2:4).

The experience of solidarity on Holy Saturday is therefore meaningful as a decisive moment in the unfolding of the mystery of the Paschal mystery. The descent does not add to what Christ suffers in a consummative fashion on the cross nor can one say that the risen Lord is somehow more glorified because his dead human soul is resurrected from among the dead. By following Christ into the realm of the dead, we encounter the solidarity of a suffering God with a human condition of complete solitude. The Son goes through the prison of hell in order to absorb the condition of all those who are suffering isolation and the experience of godforsakenness. The Son cannot return to the Father except through this Sheol of abandonment. Christ’s condition of being dead with those souls represents the blessed inversion whereby the divinity is humanized through the divinization of humanity and humanity is divinized through the humanization of divinity. The abandonment of the Son by the Father unveils the mysterious, interpenetrating love shared by the divine persons. This bond of love in the Spirit prevents the human nature of Christ co-suffering in Sheol from being severed from the consubstantial love of the Father. The passive human soul of Christ descends to suffer in solidarity with the dead, and this subjective deepening of Christ’s kenosis reveals ever more concretely and ever more personally the mystery of the triune God as love shared with humanity. In sum, Balthasar offers a decisive clue to the link between trinitarian communion and social solidarity in *Ecclesia in America*: communion and solidarity are joined in the dramatic and universal scope of the love expressed in the Paschal mystery.

A second example of how Christ’s kenotic love in contemporary theology is tied to the theme of solidarity is found in Gustavo Gutiérrez’s book on Bartolomé de las Casas. For Gutiérrez, Las Casas recognized that the idolatry of gold by the missionaries of Hispaniola made a mockery of their work of evangelization. Newly baptized Indians were the first to die in the mines while digging for the missionaries’ gold. The Indians saw no commercial value in the gold and were willing to part with the commodity. They became convinced, however, that gold was the real God of the Christian missionaries. Friar Bartolomé began to look at the situation from the viewpoint of the Indians and questioned the idolatry of his fellow missionaries. His famous defense of the Indians was predicated upon the realization of a new Christology, one that acknowledges the intrinsic dignity of all humanity in light of God’s incarnate self. Las Casas knew that an encounter with the Christ of the Scriptures forbids using the Indians as tools for the acquisition of riches and powers. Consequently, he writes that Christ did not come into the world to die for gold.

“but to suffer for human beings in order to save human beings.” Jesus’ death on the cross reveals God’s love and emphasizes God’s will “that human beings be the purpose of all things, and not inferior things the purpose of human beings.” We go against God, says Las Casas, adopting expressions from the gospel in order to designate money, when “rational creatures whom God loves so much are relegated to a status inferior to trash, dung, and the filth of the earth.” Jesus’ life and death indicate the authentic order of things.39

The exemplarity of Las Casas for the Church in America today lies precisely in his belief that the social structures cannot be examined except in a christocentric manner. If Las Casas had believed that the evangelization of culture were narrowly restricted to a realm that excluded the missionaries’ commerce in gold, then his prophetic plea for the rights of the Indians would have been measurably weakened. Sixteenth century mercantilism is far removed in time from the global economic realities of the present, yet the spiritual principles recovered by Gutiérrez from Las Casas’ witness still speak to the present situation of the Church in America. Preaching Jesus’ kenotic life and death as an expression of God’s love still displays a form of communion that bears unmistakable social consequences.

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40 Ibid., 443.
In light of the above, it appears that Hans Urs von Balthasar and Gustavo Gutiérrez share surprisingly key insights about the relationship between Christology, the task of evangelization, and God’s praxis of being in solidarity with the oppressed. Both look to the encounter with the Eucharistic self-offering of Christ as the model and source of individual and social renewal. For both the person of Christ and the form of communion made possible by God’s self-disclosure in the crucified Lord is the new path to solidarity. Christ extends his self-emptying love through a redemptive act to all of those who experience isolation from the gift of life. For neither Balthasar nor Gutiérrez does the self-disclosure of kenotic love in the person of Jesus Christ allow for any dualism between faith and life, between religion and culture, or even between culture and economics. For both Balthasar and Gutiérrez the conversion to Christ involves an integral rather than piecemeal liberation of the entire person. The cruciform notion of solidarity shared by Balthasar and Gutiérrez recalls the statement in Ecclesia in America that “the gift of [Christ’s] Spirit and his love are meant for each and every people and culture, in order to bring them into unity after the example of the perfect unity existing in the Triune God” (no. 70).

IV. Ecclesia in an Unsettled America

The document Ecclesia in America also addresses Wendell Berry’s trenchant critique of an uprooted and “unsettled” America. In the essay “The Body and the Earth,” Berry states:

41By speaking only of their similarities in this paragraph, I do not mean to imply that they hold identical Christologies. I do think, however, that their commonality has gone largely unnoticed and deserves a great deal of further exploration. See also my reflections “On Frederick Baurerschmidt’s Theo-Drama and Political Theology,” Communio 25, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 553-58.


The modern urban-industrial society is based on a series of radical disconnections between body and soul, husband and wife, marriage and community, community and earth. At each of these points of disconnection the collaboration of corporation, government, and expert sets up a profit-making enterprise that results in the further dismemberment and impoverishment of Creation.

Berry contrasts the palpable sense of fragmentation and radical alienation in “modern urban-industrial society” with Odysseus’ cunning return to the marriage bed that he built for his wife Penelope many years before. The image, taken from The Odyssey, serves as a sign of a domestic tranquility literally anchored in the soil of Odysseus’ native Ithaca. For Berry, Odysseus together with his elderly father Laertes are archetypes of the sagacious farmer-warrior, persons capable of actually restoring a lost balance in the domestic, social, and political domains of daily life.

In Ecclesia in America Pope John Paul II bemoans modern rootlessness in both its economic and cultural forms. More specifically, he lambasts the “absolutizing of the [post-industrial] economy” that invariably accompanies economic globalization and the loss of cultural, domestic, and religious traditions that invariably accompanies the phenomenon of urbanization. The pope describes the reason for the exodus from countryside to the city as follows: “... the city, with the allure of entertainment and prosperity often presented in the media, exerts a special attraction for simple people from country areas” (no.21). Like Wendell Berry, the pope is acutely aware of the modern phenomenon that Anthony Giddens neutrally labels “disembedding,” that is, “the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space.”

As local communities and traditions across the continent are uprooted in order to accommodate the accelerating processes of economic globalization and as they are forced to adjust to the new cultural climate of homogeneous, global consumption and de-personalized, purely mechanical interactions, the real but tenuous bonds of solidarity nurtured by the Church’s proclamation of trinitarian love will quickly unravel.

44Ibid., 124ff.
45EIA, 21.
In contrast to Berry, however, neither the pope nor the Catholic tradition of social teachings is thoroughly negative regarding the advent of the modern industrial and now post-industrial system of free trade. In *Ecclesia in America*, the pope is also ready to acknowledge that there are some positive consequences to the economic globalization, namely, efficiency, increased production, and the fact that the new economic links between different countries can help to bring greater unity among peoples and make possible a better service to the human family. \(^{45}\) Rather than attempting to undo completely the structures that foster a globalized economy, the pope decries those elements within the structures that widen the gap between rich and poor and tries to encourage those entities—on local, national, and transnational levels—that are trying to make globalization work for all people rather than just for corporate profit.

But Wendell Berry poses a challenge to Catholic theology at a level far deeper than that of a critique of economic and social structures. What is especially provocative about Berry’s vision of an “unsettled America” is that he clarifies that the urgent need for a properly theological understanding of the prior and more fundamental connection between the triune God and the earth. In other words, before the family can symbolize the domestic scale of the Church as the universal body of Christ and before real bonds of social solidarity can take root in local communities, one needs to recognize both God’s immanence in and transcendence above nature. The question of the earth is seldom posed in terms of fundamental theology in our day, and many will read *Ecclesia in America* in terms of a renewal of merely personal and interpersonal forms of communion. If that were the case, then the lamentation of the ecological destruction of the rain forests and the “desertification” of America would be yet another well-intentioned policy measure bearing no intrinsic relation to the document’s principal theological proposals. \(^{49}\) This is no surprise given that most forms of Christian discipleship in the West since the fifteenth century have hovered between the personal and the interpersonal while slowly severing the connection between the triune God and the earth. Balthasar in *Love Alone* refers to this phenomenon as the eclipse of “the cosmological method.” \(^{50}\) Wendell Berry likewise criticizes the all-pervasive dualisms that pit the autochthonous against the spiritual and shows convincingly that the problem of the earth is not a merely intellectual exercise whose solution can be left to “experts” in ecological matters. \(^{51}\)

In *Ecclesia in America*, Pope John Paul II by no means ignores the earth as a theological topic. The opening paragraph of the pope’s letter includes the biblical idea that the gospel is to be preached to all creation (Mk 16:15), and later the “seeds of the Word” found in the non-Christian beliefs of the indigenous peoples of America are also extolled. \(^{52}\) To be sure, the human element in the created order is presented in the document as the Creator’s crowning achievement but not bereft of “concrete obligations in the area of ecology for every person.” \(^{53}\) Quite characteristically for his own thinking and writing, the pope also lauds the intrinsic dignity of good work and laments “the harsh conditions in which many industrial and rural workers find themselves.” \(^{54}\)

These hints about the interconnectedness of the entire universe are still not enough, I fear, to ward off acosmic readings of the document. A new orientation is needed that elucidates the relational presence of a divine, triune reality “indwelling” in all that we know about the cosmos. \(^{55}\) For example, St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans that “all of creation is groaning in labor pains even until now . . . but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” \(^{56}\) Christ’s call for men

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\(^{45}\) *EIA*, no. 20. Paul Minnihan notes with seeming approval that these positive aspects of globalization were absent in the pre-Synodal *instrumentum laboris* and therefore tend to the apostolic exhortation “a more balanced and appreciated tenor” (“Encountering the American Synod”: 619).

\(^{46}\) *EIA*, 55. Cf. T. Howland Sanks, S.J., “Globalization and the Church’s Social Mission”: 646.

\(^{49}\) *EIA*, 25.


\(^{52}\) *EIA*, 16.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 54.

\(^{55}\) A proposal of this sort is developed by David Schindler in “God and the End of Intelligence: Knowledge as Relationship,” *Communio* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 510-40, here at 530.

\(^{56}\) Rm 8:22-23. See also Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 8: “Are we of the twentieth century not convinced of the overpoweringly eloquent words of the Apostle of the Gentiles concerning the ‘creation (that) has been
and women to participate in the very life of the triune God and to share in the love exchanged between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is, accordingly, a microcosmic image of the redemptive love given by the Creator to the entire order of being. This process reveals itself not through the fragmentation of objectifying knowledge but through the unifying lens of the virtue of hope. The potential conversion of universal humanity to Christ’s form of self-giving love and the adoption of human persons into the circulatory system of the Trinity is the highest form of a living process that is present in its own way in the topsoil. Pope John Paul II is by no means unaware of this cosmic connection and has, for example, written eloquently on the nuptial symbolism of the body. At the very least, the anchoring of the whole cosmic order in the earth discloses a new dimension of the notion of solidarity itself. Solidarity is the fruit of a communion that is more than just interpersonal, for the roots of communal relationality plunge deep into the earth itself. Solidarity can manifest signs of the triune communion in myriad ways. According to Berry, the elderly Laertes in Homer’s epic was a model farmer, yet his son Odysseus contributed to the building of a home. Accordingly, the type of activity that results from our fruitful harvesting of the earth and wise fabrication of urban dwelling—i.e., not just agriculture but also architecture—are themselves processes that can be cultivated so as to image the fecund dynamism of the divine communion.

Conclusion

The pope opened the Synod by looking at the ecclesial reality in America from an eschatological vantage point. He urged the participants to “stay awake, because you do not know the day groaning in travail together until now” and “waits with eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God,” the creation that “was subjected to futility.”

57 For reflections on the topsoil as a reality no less economic than theological, see Wendell Berry, “Two Economies,” in Home Economics (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1897), 62–75.


when your master is coming.” In doing so, he was not gazing away from pressing social problems toward an “otherworldly perspective.” These words from the gospel speak to the sudden advent of a eucharistic presence on the American continent whose repercussions will potentially alter its face as radically as the sixteenth century conquest. *Ecclesia in America* eschews apocalyptic fervor by drawing upon the truly transformative power of Christian notion of the kingdom of God. *Ecclesia in America* focuses our attention on the desperate need of the Church in America to become acquainted once again with the eternal newness of God’s own Word. By the same token, *Ecclesia in America* is thoroughly Guadalupan. The encounter of Juan Diego with the Woman Clothed in Sun at Tepeyac is quoted as the highest point in the first evangelization of America. It is not accidental, it seems to me, that in its original Nahuatl this figure is surrounded by cosmic imagery.

Viewing the Church in America from the perspective of the Lord’s advent does not reverse the current course of events. The eschatological union that we seek fully transcends both our earthly expectations as well as our limited hopes for its own present realization. Trinitarian communion is entrance into a mystery that is both palpable in the here and now and beyond our grasp. Earthly oppositions between a culture that promotes death and one that generates new life are fully overcome and transcended in the fullness of the trinitarian communion.

I recognize that by employing such high-minded language one can create false expectations. In truth, much still remains to be seen about how the “new evangelization” of America will take shape and whether this particular document will prove decisive in carrying out the task. Gratefully, however, *Ecclesia in America* charts a clear course and sets a high standard for Christian wisdom and discipleship in the third millennium.

59 Cf. EIA, 29: “... this spirituality ... is not opposed to the social responsibilities of the Christian life ...”; and *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, 60.

60 Cf. Sebastián Mier, “La Exhortación *Ecclesia in America*,” 37–38. Mier rightly recognizes that the relationship between the Kingdom and the Church is fundamental to interpreting *Ecclesia in America*. Unfortunately, his analysis of the document’s treatment of this relationship is conditioned by a nostalgic desire simply to revert to the political theology of Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979).

61 Virgil Elizondo, *Guadalupe: Mother of a New Creation*. 