Interview with Rev. Harold Segura

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One of the best books on the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was written by a non-Catholic: Robert McAfee Brown, a Presbyterian minister and professor at Stanford, who died in 2001. Brown was a Protestant observer at Vatican II, and in 1964 Doubleday published his account of the experience, titled An Observer in Rome: A Protestant Report on the Vatican Council.

In a similar spirit, perhaps the best writing on the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean was by another Protestant observer: Harold Segura, a Baptist minister from Colombia and a professor at the Evangelical University of the Americas. From the opening of the CELAM meeting, Segura posted daily entries to a blog called "A Shepherd in the CELAM." Like Brown, Segura's sympathies are clearly with the progressives, and many of his entries evaluate CELAM's work from the perspective of his hopes for a strong social message and greater ecumenical openness.

Segura recently agreed to respond to questions from NCR about his experience in Aparecida, especially its implications for ecumenical relations in Latin America.

Have you read the book by Robert McAffe Brown on Vatican II? Do you think that you are playing a role in CELAM similar to the one played by Browne in Vatican II?

I am familiar with McAffe's book, but please, my intention was not to do something as serious and profound as what he did. What I did was write some personal accounts. And as I wrote for the introduction of a book of those accounts that will soon be published, I originally tried to do no more than create a personal record of how I lived and reported to my friends the experience in Aparecida. In the beginning I wanted only this, that they be informal, friendly messages, until my good friend Ignacio Simal, director in Barcelona of Lupa Protestante or Protestant Magnifying Glass (See http://www.lupaprotestante.com/) suggested that those notes be published in a blog on their website. That was how we chose the name, "From Aparecida: A Pastor at the CELAM" ("Desde Aparecida: Un pastor en el CELAM"). I continued to write the daily submissions, now overwhelmed by the responsibility of addressing a broader audience.

Several days after Aparecida, it was my admired and respected friend, René Padilla, Publications Director of Ediciones Kairós publishing house (Argentina), who invited me to put the accounts together, write more, and think about a small book that would record my time at the Fifth Conference. The result of this generous idea is the book *Accounts of Aparecida: An Evangelical Pastor at the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate* (*Crónicas de Aparecida. Un pastor evangélico en la Quinta Conferencia general del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe*), published by Editorial Kairós, Buenos Aires.

They were accounts; they were personal; they were Evangelical (in the faith sense); and they preserved the warmth of the moment. Some were written with the speed of surprise, other

with the sting of confusion, others with the agility of hope, and all with the passion for unity. They are no more than an imperfect way of repaying the privilege of being there, representing the people to whom I belong, and the faith that identifies me!

More than an attempt at theological analysis (which would have been very ambitious), or at journalistic reporting (which is not my profession), what I wrote were personal accounts, with the desire to report what was happening and how an Evangelical pastor was experiencing it. Of course I am also highly motivated by the desire to promote closer ecumenical relations among the Latin American Evangelical sectors, historically characterized for being anti-ecumenical.

Are the CELAM authorities aware of your blog? Do they approve of what you are doing? Do you think that you have any influence in their deliberations?

I began writing for a group of Evangelical pastors and theologian colleagues. Later on, I discovered that other Evangelicals were also reading it. My friends were sending copies of the accounts to each other, and that was how they started to circulate. A website administered in Barcelona, called Lupa Protestante, proposed to me at that time that I begin putting the texts on a blog. From that point on (the third day of meetings), I became interested in a broader audience, although I never thought that the bishops of Aparecida would read it.

I learned that some participants in the Conference had read it. An Argentine priest mentioned the blog in his accounts, published on the Argentine Catholic University (Universidad Católica Argentina) website. Sister María de los Dolores Palencia (Mexico), Vice-President of the Latin American Conference of Religious Women (Conferencia Latinoamericana de Religiosas), also read my writings with great interest and friendship. Additionally, a Costa Rican priest, Director of the Episcopal Conference Department of Communication in his country, requested my authorization to publish one of the accounts in the Catholic seminar. Also, the priest who manages the CELAM website asked me for the address where my accounts were being published, and followed them with great kindness. I believe that it was through these indirect means that some bishops learned of my writings.

I should also say that I always kept the Conference's internal regulations in mind. I did not want to violate the agreed-upon norms, which would have been an incorrect and discourteous gesture. I never published texts that were still under deliberation, for example, nor did I express any criticisms that would go against the spirit of unity that we Evangelical observers wanted to promote during those days.

As far as the influence that my writings may have had, I do not think it has been much. What I was saying was not so important or decisive. My influence was limited to my participation as a member of the work commissions and sub-commissions. In these work groups, the commission presidents were very kind to allow us Evangelical observers to freely participate. They also listened with appreciation and allowed us to speak when we wanted to say something. This is just one gesture among many, which speaks well of the Conference and of the fraternal spirit it kept with the observers.

Has the CELAM experience affected in any way your vision of the Catholic Church? Has it caused you to have a more positive or negative impression (or both)?

This experience has been extraordinary for my personal formation as an Evangelical pastor and as a theologian committed to bringing the Catholic and Evangelical-Protestant churches closer together. You know very well that there is an enormous difference between "reading" the church in its official texts, and "reading" the people who write those texts. In Aparecida I expanded my way of reading and feeling the Catholic Church hierarchy. Being in the midst of the cardinals of the continent, plus members of the Curia, plus almost two hundred Latin American bishops, plus the Pope himself, offers many elements for a broader "ecclesiastic hermeneutics". I lived this experience as a gift from God.

You ask me if my impressions now are more positive or more negative. Personally, I have been pleasantly surprised by some of the statements that the Catholic Church made in documents prior to the Aparecida Conference. There were specifically two documents: "Participation Document" (Documenter de Participación) (2005) and "Synthesis Document" (Documento de Síntesis) (2007). There was also the "Final Document" (Documento Conclusivo), which admits that Catholicism in Latin America and the Caribbean is comprised of an immense number of people who have been baptized but who are not true disciples and followers of Jesus in their daily lives. This is an honest and courageous statement. I had never found this before in an official text.

Various bishops present in the Fifth Conference in May confirmed this same assessment. Pope Benedict XVI spoke about this in his inaugural speech when he said that Catholic believers were hoping for "a renewal and revitalization of their faith in Christ" from the Conference. And he added that it was both necessary and urgent to undertake a new kind of pastoral care, so that that baptized could follow Jesus, "live in intimacy with Him, imitate His example, and bear witness... since being disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ and looking for life in Him requires being deeply rooted in Him." So I find the analysis that we Evangelicals had developed in terms of "nominal Catholicism" to be correct.

However, we will have to hope that from this analysis new pastoral directions will emerge. Personally, I do not believe that the Catholic Church will be able to confront this dilemma. On the one hand, it does not have the number of priests necessary to provide care to the millions of baptized people, and on the other hand, its clerical and sacramental system does not allow for a large enough number of lay people to take part in pastoral activities. The need is great, and they are aware of this. But how can an appropriate response be found within a centralist, clerical ecclesiology that excludes women from the ordained ministry?

To what degree has Liberation Theology been an important factor in the discussions (even when it does not appear in official documents)? Have you heard discussion about it at breaks, dinners, etc.?

I have no doubt that Liberation Theology was present. I did not hear it referred to by name (there are reservations on the part of Catholic official leadership, which you and I know well), but I did hear it referred to in content and proposals. "The preferential option for the poor" was affirmed right from the Pope's inaugural speech. It is also easy to see in the Final Document that this theology is here to stay much longer than what its opponents would like, although with less force than what its proponents have always dreamed.

If you read the Final Document carefully, you can see the influence of the See-Judge-Act method, as well as direct references to the preferential option for the poor, to the Christian Grassroots Communities, to continuity of the concept of "structural sin", to popular and

prayerful readings of the Bible, to the role of women and to lay people, to the indigenous and afro-descendent peoples, to the integration of the Latin American and Caribbean peoples... in sum, to "cross-cutting" themes from beginning to end of the Document that revive many of the old, controversial issues of Latin American Liberation Theology.

On the other hand, time will reveal whether the direct references to these themes are in reality a triumph for the Liberationists, or whether they are merely a mechanism for conservative official leadership (which represents the vast majority of the Latin American Episcopate) to detract from their prophetic force and quell their rebellious disposition. I am not in a position to judge at this point.

Your sympathies are clearly on the side of the progressives. Imagining yourself as a conservative, how do you think you would have felt in this meeting?

Thank you for referring to my pastoral options. I am on the side of a Church that is different (Catholic as well as Evangelical), simpler, more evangelical, more prophetic, closer to what Jesus dreamed, and more Franciscan and less Roman, as Leonardo Boff so accurately put it.

If I were a conservative, I would have felt at home. Most of the Catholic episcopate in this part of the world is conservative, even though in many cases it uses liberal (and Liberationist) language. I feel that the progressives are swimming against the current.

The progressives had their day in the Second Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Medellín (1968). These are not times of renovation, but rather of conservation, times of longing for Vatican II.

Do you think that something will come out of CELAM that changes the situation in Latin America, for the church or for the more general culture?

Aparecida had a strong intra-ecclesiastic accent. In one of my accounts, I said that it would seem that the greatest concern of the church is the church itself. It is worried about the loss of Catholic believers, and the numeric growth of Protestantism. As if it were a contest in statistics!

In Aparecida the Great Continental Mission (presented by Cardinal Claudio Hummes of Brazil) was reaffirmed, which, if read correctly, is a kind of campaign for continental reconquest. And the church has the right to it. But I wonder if this campaign will have any influence in the social transformation of Latin America and the Caribbean. The problem of the continent is not the Church (neither Catholic nor Evangelical). The urgent problems here are others: poverty, violence, and corruption, among many others.

And these issues were, indeed, addressed at the Conference, but without abandoning the other great concern, which is the Church itself.

Today, precisely, I wrote one last account entitled, "In sum: Aparecida, Better than Expected," in which I join in the hope of Jon Sobrino, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jose Comblin, who believe that doors were opened there that we should be sure are kept open, to let in new breezes of gathering, communion, and solidarity. I concluded my accounts by saying, "I hope that they remain open, these doors that have just now been opened, and that those which are still closed are also opened (with theological hermeticism). It is up to us, the Evangelicals, to sustain the few that we have opened, and to look for new encouragement to open the many that we keep shut (with hermetic conservatism).

What are the prospects for ecumenism in Latin America, based on this meeting?

We non-Catholic observers celebrate the statements made in Aparecida concerning ecumenical coming together. Significant progress was made at this Conference; I have no doubt about that.

In the Final Document it says that, "The comprehension and practice of ecclesiology of communion leads us to ecumenical dialogue. Relationships with baptized brothers and sisters of other churches and ecclesial communities is an irrefutable path for the disciple and for the missionary" (#227). There is, then, a space to continue walking together for the common mission.

The word "sects" in reference to Evangelical Christians was finally eliminated. There was a desire to better understand Pentecostalism.

In sum, I believe that the official doors were kept open for continuing ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. Personally, I was very pleased by the way in which these issues were addressed. As always, though, it will now be necessary to wait and see what happens in the daily terrain of practice. Sometimes I feel that there are many reservations in that area, from both sides.

Hope and love could be common work areas. I am referring to the fight against poverty, prophetic denouncement, peace building, advocacy for justice, defense of human dignity, care for Creation, and so many other current, urgent issues. What we need in these areas is hope, and together we could do something as a common witnessto God's love.

If ecumenism has any hope, it can be found in its common mission of service and hope. I share the opinion of the well-known Belgian theologian George Casalis: "The future of ecumenicalism does not interest me in the slightest, if it does not lead to thinking first about the future of human beings and to working for this future."

As a Protestant, what was your reaction to the Pope's speech at CELAM?

It was an eloquent speech that revealed the Pope's academic quality. Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez spoke in a very positive tone regarding the inaugural words, observing that the option for the poor had been a central theme and that it would be an important guide in the deliberations of the Assembly, which is what in effect happened.

Many expected that Benedict XVI would come to reaffirm his well-known themes of Catholic Orthodoxy and his moral fundamentalism, but this is not what happened. This, alone, was the best news for the group of bishops who had feared the worst. The speech was good for what he said, but it was better for what he did not say.

You know, I was curious and decided to count the applause and record the topics that caused them. (I wrote my account that day about this applause.) All told, we applauded him eighteen times. In the first part of the speech, he was applauded when he said, "the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God that has made the poor for us, to enrich us with their poverty." He was also applauded, however, and this balanced out the trends, when he condemned the Marxist system because, "Where it has governed, it has not only left a sad inheritance of economic and ecological destruction, but also a painful destruction of spirit." The broad gamut of topics gave no one the opportunity to hold their applause entirely: defenders of the family; promoters of laicism; advocates for equality between women and men

(let's not call it "gender equality" because Benedict does not like that expression); those who hope for Church renewal; anti-capitalist and anti-Marxists—every one had cause to celebrate. Even for us five Evangelical-Protestants there. We felt at home when he asked himself, "How can we really know Christ, in order to be able to follow Him, live with Him, find life in Him, and communicate this life to others, to society, and to the world?" and then responded, "through the Word of God." He later added, "This is why it is necessary to educate the people in reading and meditation of the Word of God, that this would become their food, so that they can see through their own experience that the words of Jesus are spirit and life." At that point, he really received a hearty applause!

One of the greatest concerns of the Catholic bishops is the desertion of the Catholic Church for the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. What do you believe is causing this?

It is true. This was one of the central concerns of the Conference. The first day of the Assembly, there was much talk—exaggeratedly so, I would say—of the "Protestant invasion", "Evangelical proselytism", the "growth of sects", and other expressions that reflected certain anguish over the loss of Catholic followers in the Continent and the accusation that the "Protestantism sect" was to blame for the situation. Fortunately, those expression were tempered over the course of the meetings, and in the end, it was agreed that the word "sect" would not appear in the Final Document in reference to us Evangelicals. This was, as I said at the time, a grammatical triumph not to be underestimated.

But you asked me about the causes of Catholic desertion for the Evangelical communities. I believe that this phenomenon is part of a broader institutional crisis. In the face of this crisis, Protestantism has emerged as an alternative option, which, while it breaks with the recognized institution, maintains the foundations of that faith. The Swiss historian and sociologist Jean Pierre Bastian, widely renowned and respected analyst of Latin American religiosity, has affirmed, although not without certain boldness, that what is occurring is a mutation in the religious arena. He observes, "We could talk of mutation... there is no other dynamic than that of the economy of the religious free market... One might say that we have gone from a situation in which the Roman Catholic Church was able to impose itself upon emerging religious movements and the priest-less Catholicisms that have always proliferated, to a new situation, in which confrontation and rejection predominate between the Roman Catholic Church and an exponentially-growing, independent religious universe" (Bastian, *The Religious Mutation of Latin America*, pp. 12-13).

As you can see, it is a complex phenomenon. And because it is complex, I think that Catholicism errs in its defensive reaction (claiming that this continent belongs to it), or blaming Protestantism for the so-called "Protestant invasion." These reactions show that the depth of the phenomenon is not really understood.

This is why I liked very much the participation of Cardinal Julio César Terrazas of Bolivia, who was right on target the day of the "Anti-Protestant avalanche" when he said, "Let us look at all those who profess faith in Christ with new eyes, staying far away from attitudes of condemnation, exclusion, or feelings of re-conquest of lost spaces. Dialogue and fraternal closeness allow us to walk together, towards the unity of the Church." The feelings of re-conquest to which the Cardinal refers are out of place in this new moment in Latin America.

How did how you became an observer at CELAM?

The invitation arrived in a letter signed by Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, in the name of Pope Benedict XVI. We were eight non-Catholic guests, in order: Monsignor Tarasios (Argentina), Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Buenos Aires and South America; Monsignor Dexel Wellington Gómez (Bahamas), Anglican Archbishop; Pastor Dr. Walter Altmann (Brazil), President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil y Moderator of the World Council of Churches Central Committee; Pastor Dr. Néstor Oscar Míguez (Argentina), Methodist Pastor, Professor in the Bible and Systematic Theology; Pastor Dr. Juan Sepúlveda (Chile), Pentecostal Mission Church; Pastor Dr. Ofelia Ortega (Cuba), Presbyterian Co-President of the World Council of Churches; Mr. Claudio Epelman, Representative of the Hebrew Community; and yours truly, Pastor Harold Segura, in representation of the Latin American Baptist Union and World Vision International.

This is not the first time the Catholic Church has invited Evangelical observers. Let us remember Dr. José Míguez Bonino (Argentina), Methodist theologian present at Vatican Council II and the Medellín Conference (1968). These are gestures of ecumenical cordiality that have contributed to maintaining fraternal relations and keeping the doors open to dialogue and cooperation.

In my case, the initiative was first that of World Vision International, and then of the Latin American Baptist Union. Both sent letters requesting my participation as a representative. The President of CELAM, Cardinal Errázuriz (Chile), responded to those letters, first explaining regulations for participation and then confirming my participation. World Vision had its reasons for wanting to be present in Aparecida, as it is a Christian humanitarian aid organization with broad interfaith openness. The Latin American Baptist Union also had several reasons, particularly because more than 15 years ago, the Baptist World Alliance began formal dialogue with the Vatican in search of paths to meeting and reconciliation. I had the opportunity to participate in the most recent of these dialogues, in Buenos Aires in December 2000, when we met with Cardinal Walter Kasper and five other representatives to John Paul II.

Being in Aparecida was the result of the ecumenical kindness of the CELAM bishops, and the undeserved grace of the Lord.