

ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAMATIC STRUCTURES FACING CURRENT CHALLENGES

By Jonathan Salgado

Country of Origin: Guatemala

Serving in: Mexico

I take for granted that the majority of the participants are familiar with the organizational and programmatic structures of the Church of the Nazarene in Ibero-America. In the light of the challenges of the current realities, I invite you to think about the need and the possibilities to renew and rebuild said structures. Obviously this paper does not try to make an analysis of all the programs and how to renew them. It tries moreover, to help us reflect theologically about said necessity.

It is a complicated issue that we can not treat in a superficial way. No one can pretend to have the last word on this issue. One of the benefits of being a member of the Universal Church of Jesus Christ is that we can learn and correct one another. Thanks to the incarnation, the Church of Jesus Christ is manifested in all of its fullness in the majority of peoples and cultures of the world in a diversity of ways. And we, fallible human beings that participate in a dimension of this ecclesiastical diversity, interpret the church according to our experience with it. Even in Ibero-America, as evangelical Nazarenes in the 21st century, our ecclesiastical experience is extremely varied due to a series of factors. How is the Church of the Nazarene and its structures understood in Ibero-America? And how to renovate ourselves in a critical and, at the same time, humble way? Perhaps this reflection will help us find some clues.

I. BIBLICAL CLUES

We do not find a systematic ecclesiology in the New Testament. What we have are images, paradigms, concrete references and “mystical” and structural dimensions. Also behind the text we can find ecclesiastical clues that can help us. For example:

The church is founded on our profession of the divine lordship of Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:16-19). On this foundation (if one does not move this Christological confession from all that it implies), the church is invincible, it can never be defeated, not even by the all the demonic forces.

The church has received in stewardship the keys to the Kingdom and to the anti-kingdom (hell). Although this Kingdom (Divine Sovereignty) includes much more than the church as an institution, its most concrete manifestation is the church.

The confession on which the church is founded has as its central axis the incarnation, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ. This signifies that *the church assumes, in the measure of its possibilities, the mission of Jesus* (which is holistic mission, as defined in Luke 4:18, 19). When the church forgets its Christological confession, or twists it by substituting the *teologia crucis* for a *teologia gloriae*, its proclamation becomes a satanic instrument (see the temptations in Matthew 4:1-11; Jesus sees them as hindrance to his mission). But the most

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notable is that of the apostle who gives the most sublime Christological confession (Matthew 16:16) but just as rapidly transforms himself into an instrument of the devil (Matthew 16:22, 23) and with the best intentions!

From these Biblically founded clues we need to develop an analysis and an evaluation of the structures and organizations of our church in Ibero-America, especially thinking of its core values, because:

- 1. Not all of our structures and programs reflect a “teologia crucis”.***
- 2. Not all of our programs reflect a concern for holistic mission.***

II. HISTORICAL CLUES

Structure is necessary but it brings with it risks. We focus our attention of certain ecclesiastical processes, historically demonstrable, that occurred during the first four centuries of the church. The ecclesiastical communities of the New Testament that resisted *structuralization*, (as perhaps the Johanine communities) soon disappeared. They were absorbed by other movements; they joined heretical groups or simply died. Schillebeeckx says:

In historical terms, we can deduce from this situation that a community that lacks good and realistic structuralization in its ministry (or at least a flexible development according to changing circumstances) runs the risk of losing forever its apostleship, and finally its original Christian character, inspiration, orientation and last of all, its own identity. The ministry (*ecclesial*) has to do with the concern about preserving Christian identity in the community under circumstances that are continually changing. This history teaches us two things: the necessary unity between charisma of all the believers and the institutionalized limitation of this charisma.¹

On the other hand, the ecclesiastical communities that are gradually being structured, run the risk of distorting the faith when they adapt with little criticism the world's structures that are in force. The ecclesiastical imbalance occurs in such a slow form that the majority of the Christians of the first centuries were not even aware of what was happening.

To observe, even superficially, the situation of our church in Ibero-America we find some of the aforementioned elements, including:

- 1. The lack of a realistic structurization and flexible development according to changing circumstances. With few exceptions, for example, programs for youth, women and others are irrelevant.***
- 2. Institutional limitation of the charisma of all the believers. This results in, for example, scarce insertion of laypeople with theological formation in the secular world.***
- 3. Little criticism in the adoption of “prepackaged” programs in other contexts.***

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church With a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (SCM Press, 1985), 92.

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The previous are elements that need to be taken into account, as they reflect not only the need to analyze but also to renew our programs and structures.

III. SOCIOLOGICAL CLUES

I want to briefly explore some veins the social sciences provide us and that can help us better understand our ecclesiastical history, and also the ecclesiastical phenomena of our day, particularly in Ibero-America.

1. In the context of the *institutionalist model* of the development of social movements, the alternative ecclesial groups tend to appear at the beginning of a process, and later, as protests before an extreme institutionalization of the same movements. In fact, from a sociological perspective, one can say that every socio-religious movement could be seen as a reaction against a previous situation that those protesters perceive as too institutionalized.

The first ecclesial communities in the New Testament were a reaction, sociologically speaking, against the static institutionalism of Rabbinical Judaism. The Old Testament community (the *qahal Yave*: the assembly of the people of God) was degenerating to the point of being an impersonal religiosity and temple-centered that enclosed itself until it became the hypocritical Phariseeism that our Lord condemned with harsh words. However, the ecclesial communities that Jesus and his disciples established also were reduced to the institutionalized church of Caesar-papacy. From this period, the alternative ecclesial movements grew in number and dynamism, even in the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

2. Another significant phenomenon is the *tension between institution and charisma, authority and liberty*. The French structuralist sociologist G. Gurvitch, has proposed an interesting typology that can also help us to better understand ecclesiastical phenomenon: He says that church movements that often start as “communities”, according to his typology, later become reactions to suffocating structures and the massification that is so typical of large churches.

Leonardo and Clodovis Boff point out that sociology as well as ecclesiology show that the *community* can not exist without the *institution*. There is a dialectical relationship between the two, so they need each other. They add: “An organization can be renewed by a community but it can not transform itself into community.”² The moment in which an ecclesial community (the *ecclesiola*) separates itself from the institution (the *ecclesia*) it is transformed into an institution and has begun the inevitable path to institutionalization.

As we know, the Church of the Nazarene arose as a reaction to institutionalism and its suffocation structures. At this juncture, it is worthwhile to ask ourselves:

- 1. Could it be that the current organizational structures are contributing to static institutionalism that could degenerate to the degree of a religiosity centered on itself?*
- 2. Could it be that institutionalism could generate the rise of alternative groups with the church?*

² Leonardo Boff, *Iglesia, carisma y poder* (Editorial Sal Terrae, España, 1985), 85-87.

3. Another rich vein comes from the science of human communications that incorporates within itself material from social sciences. Charles Kraft, attempts to apply *the concept of “dynamic equivalency”* that is used in the translation of the Scriptures to theology, ecclesiology, and evangelistic methodology. It is an approach that Kraft calls “incarnational” and that is a qualitative jump that is superior to even the dialogical method in communication the Gospel. Kraft says:

Throughout the entire Bible we find a God that is concerned about communicating with his creatures and about breaking down the barriers that impede an ample social communication. The church is, essentially, communication, the communication of the Good News of the Kingdom of God. The message that it communicates consists of contents and significances which are wrapped in particular forms (languages, words, socio-cultural structures, etc.). What they try to do in communication is to get as close as possible to the meanings of the transmitter with those of the receiver. But it is the latter that has the last word as he is the one that infuses his own meanings in the messages he receives. The transmitter doesn’t communicate meanings (these are non-transferable); he communicates symbols (forms) that for the communicator have a particular meaning and for the receptor they could have very different meanings. The objective of the contextualization of the message is to get as close as possible to the meanings of the transmitter and those of the receptor in credible and creative ways.³

Applying these principles to the church, Kraft says that “a contextualized church as an updated translation should be perceived by whatever observer as an original production native to its own culture and not as something imported and poorly adapted for another native land”.⁴

This clue has implications for the cultural contextualization of programs and structures of the Church of the Nazarene in Ibero-America as well as for its full socio-historical incarnation in the midst of the pain and struggles in our regions:

1. *We can not pretend that the organizational and pragmatic structures of our current church are perceived by outside observers as an original production from our lands. Those who are within know they are not.*
2. *Moreover, we know that some of these are obstacles for the full socio-historical incarnation of the church.*
3. *Dillinger and Welch provide us with another important clue that can help us comprehend the loss of vitality in the church, as they say: “The movements of the spirit lose their vitality due to the inertia or when they are suffocated by foreign forces that develop in their interior or that infiltrate from the exterior. When this happens, a*

³ Charles Kraft, *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1979), 345.

⁴ Ibid.

movement either barely subsists and eventually dies or revives. Churches themselves do not escape this historical pattern.”⁵

The well-known evangelical anthropologist and communicator, Eugene Nida makes a valuable application to this problem from a physics perception, ***adapting the first law of thermodynamics to social communication***. The phenomenon of ***entropy, (cooling of natural systems)*** can also be observed in social and ecclesial movements. The dissipation of energies that is part of social entropy are due to various reasons (when mentioning them let us think of our church), and include: (a) too much organization and planning, and little flexibility regarding new opportunities; (b) loss of informative power when the message is converted into conduct and later, habit; (c) syncretism when the movement incorporates similar but alien ideas to its system, or when it adapts to contrary ideas that come from other cultures or ideologies; (d) at the same time, the movement suffers because it cannot adapt itself quickly enough to accelerated socio-cultural changes; and, (d) it feels unsatisfied with the original goals of the movement, because they are now perceived as too limited, because they are no longer in force, or simply because they have been met. Does this sound like something that we are already experiencing?

The “reduction of entropy”, or ***“heating up the system”***, adds Nida, can be found in two ways: (1) The movement in decline can plug itself into another more successful or pertinent, in which case the stagnant or dying movement runs the risk of being absorbed by the more lively movement. (2) The more sure way, says Nida, is the one or ***revitalization*** of the movement by means of the infusion of new energy or information, or ***new applications*** of the information it already has.⁶ For the Christian church, the most important “information” or “energy” is the dynamic of the Holy Spirit and obviously, it is for the Church of the Nazarene in Ibero-America, as well as to ***find ways to revitalize our existing structures or to make new ones by the power of the Spirit***.

The organizational and programmatic structures of the Church of the Nazarene in Ibero-America have pointed more towards numerical growth and are a fusion of theological, social, cultural, political-economic factors, through which the Spirit and Satan, the Kingdom and the anti-kingdom operate. My personal impression is that ***in Ibero-America the Church of the Nazarene, in spite of all the statistics and triumphalistic attitude, is passing through a process of loss of vitality and through an identity crisis***. The causes are many and can be catalogued within the list of negative factors that Nida presents.

With the purpose of reheating its systems, what we see is:

- 1. A considerable sector has hitched its cart to the star of success and predominant ideologies from the United States.** By means of books and audiovisual materials, concepts and ecclesiastical models are propagated that are in turn attempted to imitate and many times imposed in our regions. An effort to revitalize what already exists, that results in an apparent momentary success, without major repercussion in permanent results; this causes great frustration and even depression in many leaders.

⁵ Cited by Eugene A. Nida in *Message and Mission* (Harper and Brothers, 1975), 201.

⁶ Ibid, 204-206.

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2. **A small group has connected with movements that appear to be successful because they attract the multitudes.** In Ibero-America the influence of a television network is so strong that it has become a source of theological information for many evangelicals and the inspiration for some leaders. Through this and other media, the invitation is extended to pastors to participate in workshops and seminars to “learn something” that they believed they are lacking in their churches. This is an attempt to revitalize, that results in confusion and fragmentation.

3. **An small group has hitched their cart to sociologism.** Some with a profound interest in renewing the church dedicate themselves to study the possibilities of strategies that are the result of pure sociological analysis, either from other countries or from their immediate context. Sadly, the result is “paralysis of analysis”.

All of these reveal the need for a new infusion of the Holy Spirit, and for Biblically-theologically-sociologically correct information to put the church once more on the path that God wants.