

‘Great continental mission’ still elusive for bishops

APARECIDA, Brazil – More than halfway through a major meeting in which bishops from Latin America and the Caribbean are hammering out pastoral priorities, the “great continental mission” that several bishops predicted would emerge has not been a priority.

“We haven’t discussed it, so we don’t know what it will be like or if it will be done. We haven’t addressed it yet,” said Archbishop Joao Braz de Aviz of Brasilia, Brazil.

Instead, as the bishops met in small groups or subcommissions on different topics May 22 and 23, several issues discussed since the meeting began May 13 were missing from the outline on which their discussions were based.

The outline, which will also serve as a framework for a document that will guide pastoral work in the region for the next 10 to 15 years, contains 16 topics grouped under seven major themes.

The themes are broad and several observers questioned whether the time for discussion would be too short to do them justice. Many themes reflect concerns raised in the summary document that laid the groundwork for the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. The summary was based on thousands of pages of input submitted by dioceses throughout Latin America and 50 dioceses in the United States that have large Hispanic immigrant populations.

At least two topics – science and technology, as well as women – included in the summary document were not explicitly mentioned in the outline being used for discussion.

Speaking to journalists at a press conference, Bishop Jose Divasson Cilveti of Puerto Ayacucho, Venezuela, said one subcommission had discussed the problems women are facing in the region, and he hoped its conclusions would be taken into account by the groups that are defining pastoral priorities.

Some observers have raised questions about the emphasis being given to other topics, including base Christian communities.

In references to groups of faithful Catholics, many bishops and theologians are lobbying to maintain the term “base Christian communities” that is used in Brazil. The outline for discussion, like other church documents, refers merely to “small communities.”

The distinction is important, because base or grass-roots communities “are a priority for the Brazilian church,” Father Oscar Beozzo, a Brazilian theologian, told Catholic News Service. In conversations with journalists during the past week, Brazilian bishops have repeatedly referred to “base Christian communities.”

The outline follows the “see-judge-act” methodology that has become the cornerstone for reflection and action in the Latin American church. Church leaders rejected an initial draft of the outline May 21 in part because it did not follow that methodology, according to one bishop.

The revised outline begins with an analysis of the church and society in Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by a four-point examination of what it means to be disciples and missionaries in the world today. The last two sections are devoted to action: priorities for pastoral work and the types of church structures needed.

For the analysis of the current situation in the region, one subcommission is examining social, economic, cultural and political topics, viewing changes due to globalization as both an opportunity and a source of problems, Bishop Divasson said. Issues include rural and urban cultures, ecological damage, demographic changes, poverty, inequality, migration, violence, drug trafficking, political integration, human rights, and indigenous and Afro-American cultures.

A second subcommission is analyzing the church, both “light and shadows,” Bishop Divasson said; issues include the preferential option for the poor, youth and family ministry, the loss of members, the scarcity of vocations, financial problems and the church’s credibility.

The joy of being disciples and missionaries of Christ is the second major theme. One

subcommission's topics include Jesus as the "human face of God and divine face of man," and the Gospel as the basis for ecological responsibility and equitable sharing of goods. The second group is focusing on the Gospel's relationship to human dignity, family, work and Latin America as the "continent of hope."

The third theme, the vocation of missionary disciples, is being addressed by two subcommissions. Taking a theological approach, one is examining "the common vocation to holiness" and the spirituality of missionary disciples. The second is focusing on specific vocations, including the priesthood and diaconate, consecrated life and the laity, as well as ways of fostering vocations.

Two groups are debating the fourth major topic, the communion of missionary disciples. One is laying the theological foundation, viewing the church as "home and school of communion" and examining the church's various ministries and charisms. The second is exploring "places for communion," including dioceses and parishes, Christian communities and movements, schools and families. It is also considering popular religious devotion and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

Missionary discipleship is the fifth theme. One subcommission's topics include liturgy and prayer, Eucharist, the saints and Mary as models of discipleship, and personal conversion. The second is focusing on formation, including Christian initiation, Scripture study, Catholic education, and the need for continuing education in the faith. Adult faith formation, with an emphasis on Scripture study, has been a constant theme of the conference.

The remaining commissions focus on the church's mission and structures. Pastoral priorities being discussed include marriage and the family, children and youth, the media and social justice. Among the groups specifically listed as priorities for pastoral work are migrants, workers, the unemployed, peasant farmers, the elderly and ill, drug addicts, prisoners and people with AIDS.

One subcommission is evaluating the renovation of church structures, while another is discussing urban ministry, fostering Gospel values in society, university ministry and ways to encourage laypeople to apply Christian values and church social doctrine in their work.