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Filling the Gaps in Civil Society

The Role of the Catholic Church in Latin American Democratization

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Abstract

In this paper, we seek to draw lessons about the roles that religious institutions can play in promoting democracy in deeply divided societies by examining the experience of the Catholic Church in Latin America. We focus on the cases of Chile and El Salvador, two countries where the Catholic Church played a decisive role in advancing democracy after autocratic military rule. These two cases illustrate where theology and action productively promoted social change in highly conflictual societies. We note challenges to democracy in the region, but also new opportunities in the era of the first Latin American pope, Francis.

Keywords: religion, democracy, Cardinal Silva, Archbishop Romero, Pope Francis

Introduction

The twentieth century was, in many ways, the century of democratization. At its opening, only a small fraction of countries had regular elections and expansive suffrage, but by its close these institutions could be taken for granted in a majority of nations around the globe. However, the arrival of these democratic institutions did not, in many cases, result in full, vibrant democracy. Rather, the twenty-first century has been characterized, by and large, by “illiberal democracies” and “hybrid regimes” (Diamond; Levitsky and Way), in which political participation and information is limited and meaningful competition is practically

circumscribed. Full freedom of the press and access to office remain elusive for many individuals and social groups, with dominance of the media and money playing an increasingly important role in determining the outcomes of elections.

At the same time, in nearly every country around the globe, poverty levels have declined. Through concerted effort at both the international and local level, and propelled by economic growth, the share of the world's population living below the World Bank's poverty line (\$1.90/day) fell by more than half between 1999 and 2010. Nevertheless, the decline in poverty has been accompanied by a rise in income and wealth inequality (Deaton). Even as the incomes of the lowest have increased enough to exceed abject poverty, the incomes of those at the top have grown exponentially. This trend is as apparent among rich, advanced industrial economies as it is among middle- and lower-income countries. Historical evidence suggests that the current levels of inequality are approaching the highest levels on record, nearly eclipsing the social divisions that existed in the 1920s. The escape from poverty has not yielded a middle-class world society; rather, deep divisions between poor and rich have not only persisted but grown.

In short, two remarkably hopeful trends – an increase in democratic institutions and a decrease in poverty – have not yet given birth to the fruit they promise. In fact, there is a real danger that the counter-trends of illiberal democracy and rising inequality may stand in the way of further progress. Political organizations, especially labor unions and political parties, after initial resistance, have largely yielded to these forces. They seek to protect the turf of their members more than build bonds or institutions that would transcend divides. And economic life is becoming more segmented, rather than less, likewise decreasing the likelihood of shared solidaristic efforts among citizens.

In this landscape, religious institutions stand apart as social actors. With theological perspectives that in many cases cut across socio-economic and partisan divides, they may offer resources for building solidarity that do not exist in other institutions. Indeed, religious organizations, in spite of their sectarian nature, may be able to contribute to efforts toward an increasingly vibrant and participatory political society, and especially for building bridges across economic divides. Through both their theological underpinnings and their social institutions, religious organizations have unique tools that can shape the development of more robust democracies.

In this paper, we seek to draw lessons about the roles that religious institutions can play in promoting democracy in deeply divided societies, and to do so, we examine the experience of the Catholic Church in Latin America. It must be mentioned that some of these same divisions happened within the Catholic Church itself. The region is particularly suited to our inquiry because it experienced a broad wave of transitions from authoritarian (generally military) rule to democracy in the 1970s and 1980s (with a few cases in the 1990s). In addition, throughout much of the twentieth century, it was the most unequal region in the world, with wide fissures between a small elite and a massive number of low-income citizens, comprised of peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, and internal migrants to cities. The arrival of democracy and the adoption of new economic models since the 1980s have been intimately tied to the presence and activity of the Catholic Church, which has in several countries mobilized its members and resources to support both civil and economic change. We focus

on the cases of Chile and El Salvador, two of the countries where the Catholic Church played a decisive role in advancing democracy after periods of autocratic military rule.

We argue that the Church's contributions to democratic development are rooted in an evolving self-understanding, one that is both historically grounded and strikingly new. One novel church approach is rooted in its new orientation toward the modern world at the Second Vatican Council, held from 1962-1965. This worldwide gathering of bishops attempted to renew the Church, and its teachings were quickly seized upon by the Latin American Bishops, who sought to apply the new theological vision to their region at conferences held in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 and in Puebla, Mexico in 1979. Both of these conferences also suggested a new orientation toward the poor, and they were informed and deepened by Latin American theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, and Leonardo Boff. These thinkers formulated a new theology creatively titled a "theology of liberation," which attempted to put Vatican II into practice, and coined such terms as "the preferential option for the poor." Indeed, this term later became a touchstone employed by the Latin American Bishops conference at Puebla, and it has continued to hold sway at the most recent meeting of regional bishops in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007.

Flowing out of this evolving theological vision, the Church has undertaken three main tasks that have contributed to the rise and growth of democracy and that have directly addressed the region's economic divides; we chart these out during the years of military rule and the movements to restore democracy. First, the Church served as a forum for the sharing of information, such that human rights abuses and prohibitions on political activity could be documented and tracked. Second, the Church provided a platform for the expressions of ideas that challenged the autocratic regimes, using its credibility as an independent, morally centered organization to counter the dominant discourse that prized order over freedom. And finally, the social institutions of the Church, especially its parishes, local base communities, and social centers, served as what might be called a school of civic life, helping individuals and local social groups develop their skills for communication, protest, and policy-making. These three tasks made the Catholic Church a crucial contributor to the process of democratization in Latin America and it may be poised for a continued role in the advance of further democracy and change in the region.

In the pages that follow, we focus on two cases that stand out within Latin America for both their level of inequality and the significant challenges each faced in achieving democracy, and we document the significant, focal role the Catholic Church played in accompanying the calls for rights and participation in the face of authoritarian rule. First, we examine the case of Chile, in which the Church was among the most outspoken critics of the regime of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). By establishing a social analysis center to document human rights abuses, through the strong public statements of Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, and the fostering of local lay communities, the Church stood as a counter to the non-democratic practices of the Pinochet government. And second, we consider the case of El Salvador, where the Church, despite internal divisions, increasingly associated itself with the plight of the poor and those harmed by violence during that country's civil war. The weekly homilies of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero and the local organizing of priests, religious, and lay leaders throughout the country made the Church a critical player in exposing the oppressive nature of violence and structural poverty.

We have chosen these two cases because they represent particularly illustrative cases where theology and action productively promoted social change in highly divided and conflictual societies. Admittedly, in other cases – most notably that of Argentina during its “Dirty War” – the Catholic Church did not as fully embrace either the theological trends nor the political actions that we highlight here, and thus provided tacit support for authoritarian rule. Space constraints do not allow us fully to examine such cases, but their failings make all the more clear the important role that the specific theological convictions and social actions we detail played in the Church’s more positive contributions to democracy.

In spite of its contributions to democratic development, the Church’s status and impact today is far from secure. In fact, since the return of democracy in both countries, the Church’s roles in the three areas we emphasize may face significant challenges. In increasingly interconnected polities, especially since the dawn of the Internet, the Church’s advantages as a forum for information collection and sharing may be less important. Likewise, its moral claims may have less purchase following a rise of religious competition from Protestant churches, as well as an increase in secularism. And finally, the Church may no longer be unique in its ability to offer civil-society skills. We believe that the Church will need to adopt a more transparently humble, listening posture in order to build bridges and foster solidarity in the face of such challenges. By doing so, it will remain a vitally important political and social actor, tying together segments of the population that would otherwise remain divided.

This article is organized as follows. In the next section, we provide a general description of the newly emerging theological self-understanding that developed in the Catholic Church in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as the three roles the Catholic Church played in the process of democratization in Latin America. Then we examine each role in turn, carefully documenting how each may be observed in the experience of Chile and El Salvador. Finally, we offer a series of reflections on how the Church may play a role in the ongoing process of improving democracy and facing inequality in the region. We note the significant challenges it faces, as well as new opportunities, especially in the era of the first Latin American pope, Francis.

The Role of the Catholic Church in Fostering Democracy

Religious organizations are distinct from other civil society organizations. With a vision and ideology that make absolute claims on adherents, they have a moral legitimacy that other organizations frequently lack. This legitimacy was strengthened especially after Vatican II and when the preferential option for the poor began to be exercised in some countries. In addition, many religious bodies take an inclusive view of the dignity of all human beings, and this gives them the capacity to bring together citizens in a non-partisan, non-class-centric fellowship. In this way, religious organizations may be able to stand apart from other, seemingly self-interested civil society actors, and they may draw a cross-section of members that transcends differences in race, sex, income, and geographic origin.

The Catholic Church has had a dominant role in Latin American societies since the arrival of European settlers some five centuries ago. Historically, this made it a foundational social actor, one that offered structure, meaning, and support, though sometimes it had to fight a tendency in the Church to more closely accompany the wealthy and those in the city as

opposed to the rural areas and especially the poor. But where active, its beliefs and rituals, parish communities, local priests, and regional bishops touched nearly every aspect of Latin American life. On the one hand, this tied it into the hierarchical system of power established under colonial rule, with a high degree of centralized authority and a close linkage with economic and political elites. On the other hand, it gave the Church an ongoing link with the least-advantaged members of society, though again, this accompaniment grew much more significant after Vatican II. Parishes and chapels served people at both the high and low ends of the social ladder. No other social actor in Latin America had such a broad reach and influence.

The late twentieth century – and the challenge of operating under authoritarian governments – saw the Church engage in a process of self-examination and reflection on the reality of the political and economic contexts in which it found itself. At the Second Vatican Council this included the articulation of a new understanding of the world and an attempt to “read the signs of the times” in the document *Gaudium et Spes* (4). Liberation theologians attempted to apply this new approach to the issues of systemic poverty, which in Latin America meant that large land owners and families who owned large corporations controlled the majority of the assets in their countries. The bishops at the subsequent gathering in Puebla also addressed the issues of violence, civil strife, and even civil war after the conflicts in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and the increase of violence in Central America, including Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Church leaders tried to apply Catholic social teaching to the many problems facing Latin America at that time.

As a result of this evolving self-understanding, the Church expanded its repertoire of functions in important new ways. We highlight three such innovations. These include (1) providing new means for sharing information and engaging in political discourse, especially when such discourse was foreclosed by authoritarian governments; (2) articulating a political message calling for change, communicated with the moral legitimacy of the Church’s religious foundation; and (3) training its members in civil society skills that vitally built up social groups who could contribute to newly emerging democratic politics.

The first of these roles made the Church a vital actor in society. As authoritarian regimes sought to limit the flow of information – whether about their military activities, arrests and detentions of citizens, or human rights abuses – the Church was able to serve as a clearing house for significant political information. Drawing on its network of parishes and social centers, the Church had members *in situ* throughout the national territory; these members were able to convey what they saw and observed to church leaders and newly founded institutions. In several countries, the Church became the first and most important institution to document the “disappearance” of dissidents, and its records later proved crucial to processes of truth and reconciliation. In other settings, the Church was able to use its publications and public addresses as means of conveying information to the broader public. This raised consciousness about the policies and activities of each regime. Sometimes this came at a high cost. For example, the Jesuit University radio station YSAX in El Salvador was bombed three times, and some human rights observers were killed or “disappeared.” In highly unequal societies, it is often the poorest members of society who have the least access to news and updates on ongoing social conflicts. Through the Church, this informational disadvantage was at least

partly overcome, allowing lower-income citizens to more fully engage the process of political change.

In addition, the Catholic Church occupied an extremely influential position in society, even under authoritarian rule. With its long history, strong institutions, and its moral stature, it possessed a legitimacy that few other social actors could rival. It could not simply be written off as a partisan or dissident organization; it was considered a pillar of public life and a voice deserving of recognition. Some bishops wielded this moral and political status to challenge the military governments, both in public and in private, and to proclaim the just cause of those who the regimes saw as opponents. In this way, the Church served as a voice for those whose structural position would otherwise have left them out of the political conversation, and it lent legitimacy to their efforts. Liberation theology provided a philosophical and Bible-based rationale for this action, offering a compelling intellectual underpinning for many adherents. In addition, the Church made use of its international network to raise consciousness outside Latin America, bringing external pressure for change to bear on the military and their supporters. It must be mentioned that sometimes the positions taken by the Church came at a great cost. Sometimes violence and repression were directed at the Church when information was shared or human rights abuses were documented.

Finally, the Church used its deep penetration of society to serve as a school for civic life. Parishes launched educational campaigns, taught reading and writing, and provided their members leadership and public-speaking opportunities. They also fostered the development of small, local base communities, in which members read the Bible together, prayed, and planned shared actions aimed at political change. It was in these small groups that a feeling of solidarity was developed, decisions were made about protests and other mobilizations, and local leaders came to be identified. This action of the Church stands in stark contrast to that of other social organizations; while others saw the poor as needy recipients of aid, some in the Church saw them as potential agents of change and provided them with new skills to help them fill this role.

In short, the Church adopted three significant roles that contributed to the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. Although none was complete in itself, each offered an important counterbalance to the limitations presented by the existing regimes. Sometimes this meant confronting dictatorships that were supported by the United States, in some case militarily and financially. In addition, the Church provided the underlying structure for the development of effective democratic institutions. After years of retreat from public engagement, especially by the groups most targeted by the authoritarian regimes – such as labor unions, students, and indigenous rights groups – a new group of engaged citizens was being prepared by the Church. We seek to document some of this important activity in the cases of Chile and El Salvador below.

The Catholic Church as a Forum for Information Sharing

One emphasis of the Second Vatican Council was a call for the Church to more actively engage the political and social realms; this message had special resonance in Latin American countries, which had been predominantly Roman Catholic but had seen the church hierarchy largely reluctant to challenge secular authorities. Part of this new vision was inspired by pre-

Vatican II thinkers like Jacques Maritain, who proposed that the Church take a more active role in politics, not necessarily the clergy, but through the increasingly educated lay Catholic men and women. In Latin America this inspired many young politicians to form Christian Democratic political parties, and also allowed clergy to more actively address political and social issues from the pulpit.

El Salvador: Making the Most of the Church's Means of Communication

In El Salvador, during the Civil War, the regime sought to limit information about the progress of the conflict. Part of this was done without the need for coercion, especially with the print media. Since most of the newspapers in the capital of San Salvador were owned by members of the wealthiest and elite families, the reporting was skewed with a favorable bias toward the conservative government, the military, or right-wing paramilitary groups. For example, the conservative newspapers never mentioned any of the government troop activities, but always mentioned where they had seen rebel or so-called “guerrilla” forces. They also reported on any of the wealthy who had been kidnaped, but never reported on any of the brutal massacres in the country, i.e. the horrible massacres at the River Sumpúl and El Mozote went unreported.

Radio was often the most popular form of communication during this time, and both right- and left-wing politicians had access to the radio. In addition, there were several radio stations which were affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. The archdiocesan radio station broadcast any major church event, including the Sunday homilies of the Archbishop. The Jesuit university also housed a radio station, Radio YSAX, which served both educational and ecclesial purposes. This radio station encouraged political debate and tried to present relevant data on what was happening during the civil war for both sides, and the rector of the Jesuit José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA), Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., had a weekly radio broadcast. Segundo Montes, S.J., professor and university Vice-Rector, also had a regular radio program that described the political situation. The Jesuit radio station also broadcast all of the weekly Sunday homilies of the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. Some historians claim that as many as ninety percent of the country listened to Romero's weekly homilies live (Carranza). In most rural towns, all activities stopped during the two hours the Sunday mass was broadcast live on the radio.

Television was also utilized by both sides. There was a weekly television program broadcast on the government radio station. From 1985 until the time of his murder in 1989, Ignacio Ellacuría hosted a bi-partisan television program. One of the highlights of this program included a debate between one of the Salvadoran generals and a *comandante* of the rebel forces. For the most part, the archdiocesan and Jesuit radio stations tried to present both sides of the political situation, even though most of the conservative media outlets portrayed them as “leftist.” Thus, the Roman Catholic Church in El Salvador employed several means to counter the otherwise widespread lack of information or bias in the media. First, the archdiocesan offices and the Jesuit university (UCA) used their publications to share details of recent battles, troop movements, and allegations of human rights abuses. In particular, the Jesuit-edited journal *Envío* regularly included significant information gleaned from parishes and catechists in its articles on current events. This allowed Catholics, and by extension, the broader public, to learn about developments far afield. In addition, the Jesuit university (UCA)

established several centers to discuss what was happening in the country, from politics to religion to human rights abuses. The archdiocese established a Center for Human Rights (today called the *Tutela Legal*) to document what it considered as human rights abuses. Archbishop Romero, and later Archbishop Rivera y Damas regularly met with members of families who had lost loved ones, or whose loved ones had experienced torture or simply disappeared. From these meetings, a group of mothers who had lost family members formed a group called “Las Madres de la Solidaridad.” Taking the name of solidarity, it was more than simply a prayer or self-help group. Near the end of the civil war this group regularly organized marches and distributed flyers to document the atrocities committed largely by government sponsored or military troops. The archdiocesan office that focused on human rights abuses also contributed thousands of documents to the United Nations commission which would later promulgate a finding in 1992 documenting the atrocities which took place during the Salvadoran civil war.

Chile: A Forum and Clearing House for Documenting Human Rights Abuses

During the Pinochet regime there was an increasingly antithetical attitude of the state towards the Church. In part this was due to Cardinal Silva’s establishment of the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*. This Vicariate was responsible for documenting the human rights abuses during the Pinochet regime. The office was symbolically placed next to the Cathedral and became a space for those who had been tortured or abused, or for those who wanted *the Vicaría* to help them find more information about their relatives who had disappeared. When it was first established General Pinochet tried to directly intervene and demanded a meeting with Cardinal Silva. His claim was that the Church had no right to interfere nor provide sanctuary for those the State deemed criminals or enemies of the State. The DINA, which functioned as a state sponsored secret police, had issued a statement saying that the Church was not allowed to show mercy nor to safeguard those who opposed the rule of law. The Church responded vigorously, with a statement from the bishops describing the tradition of mercy and sanctuary back to the time of Jesus Christ. The bishops also wrote a stern letter of rebuke alleging that those who continued to persecute church members through torture faced excommunication. In a famous letter they mentioned the state institutions they felt were working against the laws of God through torture and other abuses – though they did not name individuals, saying each person relied on his or her own conscience. In response, the Pinochet regime harassed particular church leaders responsible for running the *Vicaría* and the DINA organized a protest at the airport in Pudahuel. When three bishops returned from a conference in Ecuador they were greeted by protestors who pushed them and threatened them. The local police were told not to intervene (Smith).

Over time the *Vicaría* expanded its initial purview, moving toward educational programs for the poor, helping miners who had been told they were no longer allowed to organize, and, through the leadership of Fr. Christian Precht, opening branches in every diocese in the country of Chile. They also formed an institution that promoted peace called COPACHI led by the Jesuit priest Fernando Salas. Between COPACHI and the *Vicaría* they were able to systematize their documentation of human rights abuses, so that when the United Nations investigation began many of their documents were utilized to show the many human rights

abuses of the Pinochet regime. In the end, the *Vicaría* became not only a safe haven for victims but also a refuge for those who were isolated or alienated by the government regime.

The Catholic Church as a Moral Platform for Dissent

Another issue which became central at both major episcopal conferences, Medellín and Puebla, was that the Church needed to have a more active voice speaking out against institutionalized violence. The bishops addressed both violence against the poor and violence that was occurring in the civil war, with torture and disappearances of political opponents receiving special mention, especially at Puebla. The Church wanted to reassert its moral voice in the discussion, and in some countries work toward peace and social justice by denouncing atrocities. This led to the articulation of the necessity for the Church to express its opinion and act as a voice for those who had none.

El Salvador: The Church as a Voice for the Voiceless

One of the main voices for the Church in El Salvador was the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. Romero became a vocal critic of the government and especially the military when he saw an increase in the repression of the general population. While some called him a prophet, in democratic terms he became a voice for the many in the country who had no power and no say in the democratic process. Archbishop Romero became known as a “voice for the voiceless,” since his Sunday homilies were broadcast live from the San Salvador Cathedral, as a means of commenting on ongoing developments of the violence, the human rights abuses, and the attacks on churches or its parishioners during the civil war.

The story of Archbishop Romero starts with his fellow priest, friend, and master of ceremonies at his installation as Archbishop, the former rector of the diocesan seminary, Rutilio Grande, S.J. The murder of Rutilio Grande on March 12, 1977, greatly impacted the new archbishop. Sobrino, present at the funeral mass that Romero insisted on celebrating, said that the death of Rutilio opened the eyes of the archbishop (33). The killing of the first native Salvadoran priest caused Romero to celebrate only one Mass in the entire archdiocese on the 20th of March as a sign of protest. Over 100,000 people attended the Mass, which spilled out from the cathedral into the main square and surrounding streets. At this Mass, Romero preached that it is Christ who evangelizes and gives his body and blood for the world in the Eucharist and “the only force that can save is Jesus who speaks to us of the real liberation” (Maier: 34). But Romero also tried to be a force of reconciliation at this time. Within the first three months of his episcopacy, Archbishop Romero had transformed into a different bishop, one who looked to encounter the people and to suffer as they suffered. The Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino writes that he was impressed by the way Romero confronted the repression. After a young Jesuit was captured, Romero refused to sign a letter stating he was not mistreated. After the army entered Aguilares, expelling three Jesuits and killing hundreds of *campesinos*, he went there to denounce the atrocities. In his homily in Aguilares, Romero prophetically preached, “You have converted the town into a jail and a place of torture” (Delgado: 185).

In the last month of his life, Romero consciously chose to run the same risks as the poor. By standing in solidarity with the poor, Romero would make the ultimate sacrifice. Starting in February of 1980, Romero received almost continuous death threats. In spite of these threats

of bodily harm, he continued to denounce the repression in the Sunday homily on February 24. He preached, "I take advantage of this first Sunday of Lent . . . to energetically protest for this new repressive act, which is not only against the Church, but also goes directly against the people, already what the authors of this attempt want to avoid is that the people will know the truth, that they have criteria to judge what is happening in the country, and reach a unity to say definitively, 'Enough!,' and to put an end to the exploitation and domination of the Salvadoran oligarchy" (Cavada: 302).

Near the end of his last Sunday homily, Romero made a special plea to the military. He spoke gravely, "I would like to make a call in a special manner to the men of the Army, and concretely to the bases of the National Guard, to the police, and to the jails: Brothers, you are of our same people, you kill your own *campesino* brothers and, against the order to kill another man, should prevail the law of God which says: 'Do not kill.' No soldier is obligated to obey an order against the law of God. An immoral law, no one should complete it. Already it is time to recover your conscience . . . In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose wailing rises to the heavens each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I pray to you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!" (Cavada: 453).

On the last day of his life it was Romero's usual day off. That morning the death threats increased, and even the Jesuit radio station at the UCA received threats for airing the homily, one official saying that the archbishop's words were in fact a crime. On the way back from the beach he stopped by Santa Tecla and went to confession with his Jesuit spiritual director who lived there (Maier: 84). They dropped him off at the sisters' place at the hospital of the Divine Providence, and he just had enough time to shower before mass. The Mass began promptly at six, and after the homily as he approached the altar to begin the eucharistic prayers, a shot rang out which would take his life. He fell to the ground and several sisters rushed to his side attempting to revive him. He was rushed to the clinic, but it was too late. During mass the next day, Fr. Ricardo Urioste expressed what most people were feeling, "They have killed our father, they have killed our pastor, they have killed our prophet and killed our guide. It is as if each one of us has lost a part of our own self" (Maier: 86). In the end, the voice of Oscar Romero was silenced, but not before he was able to vocally defend the human rights of many in El Salvador. In addition, as Romero predicted, he did live on in the Salvadoran people, animating his successor, Archbishop Rivera, to continue to work towards peace and justice in El Salvador.

Pope Francis re-opened the cause for sainthood for Oscar Romero, and he was beatified in May of 2015. For years some in Latin America have called him a martyr and a saint, but for many, especially the poor in El Salvador during the civil war, he was a voice for those who had none. Since there was little or no way for the common person to influence the country through a democratic presence or voice, it was Archbishop Romero who became their representative voice, a voice for the voiceless.

Chile: The Church as a Moral Voice against Dictatorship

The Chilean Catholic Church used its position of moral leadership to directly challenge the authoritarian style of governance in Pinochet's early years. This approach was all the more trenchant given the Chilean military's self-understanding as a guardian of the nation. To be

confronted by the Church – whose legitimacy was largely unquestioned in the public’s eyes – was to be roundly rebuked. In addition, the dictatorship projected an image of Pinochet that he was a devout Roman Catholic, a daily communicant at mass, who insisted on Catholic chaplains for the Chilean armed forces. But later, Pinochet wanted more power to name the head military chaplain, who through Pinochet’s influence would eventually be named bishop. Pinochet also publicly stated that “the communists must be exterminated” and orchestrated the plan for the implementation of torture, disappearances, and the elimination or expulsion of his political opponents from the country.

The role of the Catholic Church during the time of the dictatorship and later election of Pinochet as President was significant. First, the Church responded to the disappearances, deaths, and targeting of not just politicians who were also Roman Catholic, but also in some cases lay catechists, men or women who were members of religious orders, or even priests who were both foreign born and Chilean nationals. Some of these priests were simply expelled, but some were listed on the front page of the largest newspaper in Santiago at the time, *El Mercurio*, with the headline, “Se Busca!” Through its theology of death and resurrection, the Catholic Church presented a subversive narrative, giving hope and meaning to citizens who stood in resistance to the dominant ideology of state control, nation building, and the need to silence critics.

The Church lived out this theology through a focused strategy of solidarity taken by the archdiocese during this time period, led by Cardinal Raul Enrique Silva. Cardinal Silva, similar to Romero in many ways, became an outspoken voice for the voiceless both in ecclesiastical circles as well as the wider political arena. Cardinal Silva provided two different pieces of resistance to the dictatorship of Pinochet. First, he established the famous *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*, an archdiocesan branch which was responsible for documenting the torture and repression. This *Vicaría* documented the human rights abuses and took eyewitness testimony, including from members of the Chilean military who wanted church officials to know about some of the atrocities committed. In a sense, their Catholic guilt and this creation of an archdiocesan office as a safe haven for confidentiality, allowed Cardinal Silva to have the facts in hand when he confronted the State.

A particularly poignant moment of opposition occurred in the annual *Te Deum* ceremony in the Santiago Cathedral. Considered an essential moment of civic life at the end of each calendar year, Chilean presidents and lawmakers traditionally attended the event, at which the archbishop speaks and offers prayers of thanksgiving for the past year and asks for blessings for the coming year. General Pinochet attended, as had his predecessors, but he found a lukewarm reception, and the homily which was normally pro-forma extolling the good of governance, was instead a sharp critique of Pinochet and his abuse of power.

The Catholic Church as a School of Civic Life

The episcopal conference at Puebla in 1979 outlines the necessity of constructing a civilization of love. Inspired by the vision of Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council, the document stresses the importance of participation, especially in the creation of a more just and equitable society. It emphasizes that “a civilization of love” is inclusive and condemns any violent divisions or structures which discourage participation of men and women in the larger

social framework (Puebla: 8). Later this outlines important steps for the inclusion of those on the margins of society as well, stressing not only the importance of educating the family, but also giving opportunity for all to share in the opportunities each country may offer.

El Salvador: The Church as Tutor of Literacy and Civic Participation

Inspired by the orientation toward the poor embodied in the Vatican II documents and the meetings of the episcopal conference, the Catholic Church in Latin America began to make important new efforts to serve the poor, especially in terms of pastoral outreach and education. In El Salvador, one of the many people inspired by these documents was Fr. Rutilio Grande, S.J. While he was rector of the seminary in the early 1970s, Rutilio Grande began to minister to a poor rural community not far from where he had grown up. On the weekends he would celebrate mass in the rural areas, and increasingly became interested in more creative ways the Catholic Church might respond to their needs, not only spiritual needs but also educational and economic. In 1972, he left the archdiocesan seminary that had been run by the Jesuits since its inception in order to respond to the call he felt after the CELAM conference at Medellín, which called for the Church to re-focus its ministry to the poor and those on the margins of society.

At the center of Grande's efforts was a pastoral plan for the poor, which went far beyond simple catechism. It organized the Church into Christian Base communities. But he realized early on that literacy and education needed to be at the heart of the plan (Kelly: 124-90). At the time he moved to Aguilares, it was an agrarian center in the Salvadoran countryside, where most boys received little education beyond the fifth grade. Most young girls received even less, and both boys and girls often dropped out of school during the crop picking season, especially during the coffee season. Grande realized that it was impossible to teach people about the Bible and have them participate more in the Catholic liturgy, as emphasized at Vatican II, if they could not read. His pastoral plan thus began with education, so that *campesinos* could not only read at mass, write petitions, and become more actively involved, but also improve their lives and livelihood. The plan also utilized teams of younger Jesuit scholastics and women religious without asking for any government subsidies for the night classes run at all the parishes and even small *capillas* or chapels in his sector. At the time of his death, the plan was working. New types of schools, later called *Fe y Alegria*, came to provide an education to the poor, first aiming at basic education and today educating students through secondary school.

In addition, Grande gave fiery public homilies, and the more he got to know about the people among whom he worked, the more he realized the systemic problems they faced. Together with his teams of young priests and seminarians, he "went out into the barrios and the shantytowns, lived in the squalor, worked beside the exploited and dispossessed, listened to them, shared the burden of their despair" (O'Malley: 13). Grande's frustration grew with the systemic economic disparity he observed, as well as the lack of housing and the despair of the common farm worker. This became increasingly apparent in his rhetoric in his Sunday homilies. After a homily he gave in Apopa, in which he referred to the *Cains* of society – which he identified with the large landowners and corrupt government officials – the counter-reaction was decisive and swift. In March of 1977, on his way to celebrate Sunday mass in the town of Aguilares, Grande's truck was riddled with bullets, killing him and the lay catechist helper and an altar boy who had hitched a ride. While his voice advocating for the working

class and the poor was silenced, many of the programs he implemented continued on, by teams of younger Jesuits, priests, seminarians, religious brothers and sisters, and formed lay leaders.

Chile: The Church as Promoter of Base Community Mobilization

In Chile, Cardinal Silva was also instrumental in his support of Christian base communities. The base communities functioned as a way of dividing the larger parish community into smaller, more intentional communities that would meet on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. While they were intended to be a place of catechesis, they quickly became a way to teach lay Catholics more about the faith especially in poor and rural areas of Latin American countries. They also became vehicles for the Church's teaching in areas of social justice. While in some areas they taught basic reading and writing skills to the poor, the communities also reflected on the Bible readings of the week and created spaces for the formation of lay leadership. There was great tension during the Chilean dictatorship; as these communities reflected on the gospel, they also applied it to the world around them. Since they studied different biblical interpretations during the different liturgical seasons, they would have new meaning based on the world around them. Lenten readings from Isaiah, Old Testament readings such as Exodus, and the Gospel of Luke had more poignant interpretations during a military dictatorship. For example, the passages about Moses confronting authority and saying "Let my people Go!" and the Magnificat prayer "lifting up the lowly" served as important inspiration in standing up to abuses and violence.

Just as Cardinal Silva had trouble with Pinochet and the military junta with his ideas to create a center for peace, Pro-Paz, which would later become the *Vicaria de la Solidaridad*, so did some of the pastoral plan run into trouble (Pinochet de la Barra: chap. 6). After one trip to visit Rome in 1975, Silva remarked that he could not stay long enough to visit with the pope since when he did, "news would come every day about the persecution of Chilean priests . . . 'who were arrested because of the virtue of their actions directly linked to evangelical care . . . an expression of animosity, a persecution, against the church'" (Pinochet de la Barra: 161). In part, as some priests worked in the poor neighborhoods and promoted Christian base communities, if they spoke out against the injustices in their neighborhoods, they were branded as Marxists or Communists by the Pinochet regime. Similar to Romero, Silva was known as a cardinal who provided a voice for the voiceless, but differently his pastoral plan also promoted Catholic "worker priests" who worked side by side with the poor during the week. This went against the model of a simple priest who should simply "pray and obey" and who should not preach about economic injustices or the human rights abuses prevalently seen in the working class and poor neighborhoods during the dictatorship. Because of his introduction and shepherding of the base communities, defense of human rights, and support for all economic levels of the church, even today, Cardinal Silva is fondly remembered by many Chileans who saw him as someone who strove to improve the conditions of parishioners, not just spiritually, but also through the mind – through education – by speaking out against human rights abuses. Church members were encouraged to take an active role in politics and civil life.

Conclusion: The Future Role of the Catholic Church in Deepening Democracy

In this way, the Catholic Church in El Salvador and Chile came to make three major contributions to the process of democratization. By serving as a clearing house for information, it allowed more vigorous and informed political organizing to occur, and even fostered nascent civil society organizations. By staking out a moral position opposed to repression, and frequently expressing this position through homilies, the media, and local base communities, the Church provided a foundation for committed action by previously disempowered members of society. And it spoke a moral language that could attract support from abroad. Finally, the Church provided vital citizenship skills through its education and literacy campaigns, creating a new class of social actors with the capacity to critically evaluate policies and form movements calling for political change.

It is crucial to note that the Catholic Church's embrace of these roles had a distinctly theological origin and was not undertaken for simply instrumental or organizational reasons (Gill; Trejo). In other words, the content of the Church's theological vision was decisive in its choice of actions (Grzymala-Busse; Hagopian). Vatican II, and the subsequent conferences of the Latin American bishops, provided a new self-understanding for the Church and its prelates – one that took more seriously the situation of the poor and called on the Church to be an active agent of social change. Such a call was particularly well-suited to the needs of democratizing societies, where civil society needed to develop and citizenship needed to be strengthened.

However, if the Catholic Church's importance in the transition to democracy was largely driven by its embrace of the three critical roles we have highlighted above, the Church may now face new challenges, ironically, because the transition was successful. Because authoritarian regimes no longer control political life, the Church's unique status as a moral force of opposition has been diminished. At least in principle, information and access to media are now free, and opportunities to express dissenting views are expanded. Citizens no longer need the Church to provide them an avenue for expression, but rather can turn to the Internet with its many commercial and social media opportunities as fora for engaging public issues.

Nevertheless, as noted at the outset of this essay, the transition to democratic institutions has not meant the emergence of a fully functioning, participatory democracy in every country in Latin America. Indeed, even in countries where elections tend to be free and fair, significant restrictions – whether legal or practical – on the media and political participation threaten to stall nations in a state of illiberal democracy. In addition, the ongoing high level of income and wealth inequality in the region leaves some actors with far less access to the political decision-making process than others. So, the Church may still have an important gap to fill, albeit a transformed one. Without a monopoly status as a provider of information, and with diminished religious or moral legitimacy, its role will necessarily evolve.

This likely means that the Catholic Church will need to be more humble in its activities, and will especially need to build bridges to non-believers and members of other faiths. Indeed, in his visit to Latin America in 2015, Pope Francis set a new tone for religious dialogue in the region. Offering twenty-two speeches over the course of his week-long journey to Ecuador, Bolivia, and Paraguay, he notably addressed both the Catholic faithful and a broader set of social actors, representing indigenous faiths, social movements, labor unions, women's

organizations, farmers, and landless peasants. Throughout, he practiced a new approach to the Church's engagement in this historically Christian region, one that emphasizes humility, listening and accompaniment, and a gentle (re-)invitation to a shared faith.

He suggested that the Church's role in society can no longer be taken for granted and must be accompanied by humility. In fact, he admitted that the Church had lost some of its credibility in the region due to its complicity in "grave sins," most notably in the "crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America." Likewise, during the Cold War, some in Church leadership gave tacit support to dictatorial regimes in the Americas. In addition, he seemed acutely aware that the Church has seen many adherents turn to other forms of Christianity in recent decades, especially Pentecostal churches that emphasize a more direct and spirit-filled form of prayer. He reached out to these fellow Christians not with reproach or questioning, but rather with a sense of fraternal respect and even encouragement. In a particular way, he seemed open to their style of prayer, and drew links between it and the Church's devotional practices. It was a striking contrast from earlier centuries, in which Church leaders spoke as unquestioned (and unquestionable) sources of authority. Francis offered a model of humility as the path to engagement, especially in an increasingly pluralistic world.

But a new humility has not implied a retreat from speaking boldly. Rather, under Francis the Church has become all the more forthright, especially when speaking on matters of economic and ecological justice as experienced by the Church in its poorest and most marginalized members. In each setting, Pope Francis spoke as one who has been listening carefully to the lived experience of the poor. He was unafraid to adopt the language they use – calling for meaningful "change" to a system that has too often left them without equal access to "land, lodging, and labor." This language has rankled the sensibilities of some who see it as a papal threat to global capitalism, but it is best understood as the pope using his own voice to speak the truth experienced by the Church's members among the poor.

Powerfully, Pope Francis made these often-ignored Christians the protagonists of the Church's mission of justice and reconciliation between peoples and with creation. "You, the lowly, the exploited, the poor and underprivileged, can do, and are doing, a lot. I would even say that the future of humanity is in great measure in your own hands." They are the actors who will chart out the Church's influence in the world. The Church, and its leadership embodied in the hierarchy, are at the service of this evangelical project.

Indeed, listening to the lived needs of the poor provides the impetus for bold new dialogue in the church. Concern about economic inequality, environmental degradation, and the struggles of Christians to live their marriages and family life faithfully in the light of broken relationships, divorce, and social change, emerge from the real challenges faced by the Church in its members. Engaging them moves the Church out of safe theological verities and into the complexity of markets, ecology, and social norms; Pope Francis seems ready to embrace this task, and especially to entrust it to the faith-filled experience of those who sit in the pews and live their lives in the world.

Finally, Pope Francis' vision of religious dialogue seems to involve a gentle invitation, or re-invitation, to faith. His focus on economic and environmental issues springs, first and foremost, from his deep engagement with the gospel, where he envisions a Jesus who lives

and breathes God's desire to reconcile all creation, in all its beauty and fragility. But he recognizes that not all people of good will share his faith – or any faith – so he reaches out to them in an effort to invite them into a larger religious version. In an earlier era, the Church quite openly practiced proselytism; in the Francis era, it reaches out with a personal invitation into depth and prayer, built on a shared foundation of respect and purpose. Much of what Pope Francis hopes to infuse into the broader church was articulated in the final document of the fifth conference of Latin American bishops at Aparecida. In Part VIII of this document the bishops articulate the necessity for the Church to enter into the realm of the political, especially becoming a voice of the voiceless for those on the margins. They articulate that in an increasingly globalized world the Church must advocate for solidarity and international justice. For this reason, a preferential option should be made for the poor, the sick, migrants and those unjustly imprisoned. In many ways Francis has attempted to articulate this vision for the broader church, becoming a voice for those who are not able to participate in democratic or other societies.

Humility, listening, bold proclamation, and an invitation to faith. These stand as the new model of religious dialogue by the Catholic Church in Latin America. Although they represent something of a new direction, they very much echo the framework we observed in the experience of Chile and El Salvador. They stand as a distinct contribution to the overall program of the Catholic Church, and to the process of deepening democracy in divided societies.

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