“Reconciliation through Justice:
The Catholic Response to Cold War Communism in Latin America”

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"The peace of all things lies in the tranquility of order; and order is the disposition of equal and unequal things in such a way as to give to each its proper place."

—St. Augustine, The City of God Against the Pagans, XIX:13, c. 420

"Mutual agreement results in the beauty of good order, while perpetual conflict necessarily produces confusion and savage barbarity. Now, in preventing such strife as this, and in uprooting it, the efficacy of Christian institutions is marvelous and manifold. First of all, there is no intermediary more powerful than religion (whereof the Church is the interpreter and guardian) in drawing the rich and the working class together, by reminding each of its duties to the other, and especially of the obligations of justice."

—Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum,” §19, 1891

"Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice."

—“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (Gaudium et Spes), promulgated by Pope Paul VI, §78, 1965

We are here to explore the ways in which religious beliefs and religious institutions condition and shape the unfolding of two other dimensions of human conduct: namely, war making and peace making. This is a rich topic. In thinking about it, we cannot avoid paying heed to larger, closely related questions, such as the implications of faith for political action, the proper relationship between religion and the state, the search for rights that supersede constitutions and positive law, and the moral aims and obligations of the state. We live in times in which these questions still bear tremendous normative weight, and so they have an immediate practical significance for all of us, whether we profess a religious faith or not.

But as a historian, I am also interested in the ways in which past generations have responded to these questions, questions that have been subsumed under a variety of binominal expressions that imply the existence of a natural tension, if not conflict, between religion and the body politic: throne and altar, cross and sword, priest and prince, church and state, the city of God and the city of man. These are useful simplifications, because they remind us that, in the Western world, we have witnessed something that may be unique in human history: the rise of a religion — Christianity — that demands both a separation of the two spheres while nevertheless insisting on its moral superiority to the body politic and on its concomitant duty to oversee and correct the activities of Caesar. This “remarkable contradiction,” as Pierre Manent has called it, sets Christianity apart from both Judaism and Islam. Unlike those two religions, Christianity has never given any laws for the government of the body politic; in fact, Christianity is dogmatically indifferent to the kind of political regime that a nation chooses for itself. And it was just that freedom, Manent argues, that cleared the way for the eventual secularization of the state and its formal

1 The commitment to separation obeys the imperative of the Church’s founder to “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” in Matthew 22:21.
emancipation from any kind of theocratic influence. We cannot pause here to explore further Manent’s core argument that “the political development of Europe is understandable only as the history of answers to problems posed by the Church,” but I have raised it for two reasons. First, because it reminds us that religion and political conflict, at least in the West, have been practically inseparable, and for a great many different reasons. Therefore, I think that we should resist the temptation to think of the three terms in the title of our symposium, “Religion, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution,” as three billiard balls whose discrete and contingent effects on one another can be observed, recorded and statistically analyzed. If Manent is right, or even half-right, a procedure like that might be possible, but its results would be meaningless. Rather, I suggest we think of “religion, conflict, and conflict resolution” as the tips of a three-cornered hat, or as what Manent calls a “structural problem” embedded in the heart of the West’s political history.

The second reason I have opened this paper with Manent’s “contradiction” (I actually do not think it is a contradiction, or even a paradox; to me it seems perfectly congruent with what one would expect of a religion) is that it provides an ideal entry into my topic, which is the Church’s response to Cold War communism in Latin America. In order to understand why this is so, a sixty-second overview of Church-state relations in Latin America is in order. During the three centuries of Iberian rule in America, the structural problem that Manent refers to would be temporarily resolved in the regalism of the Habsburg and Bourbon monarchies in the case of Spain, and in that of the Avis and Bragança monarchies in the case of Portugal. That is to say, the Church became the captive of the monarchies, which increasingly deprived it of its autonomy in matters of governance and policy, while respecting its exclusive authority in strictly spiritual matters. Then, after the successful challenge to monarchism that swept Spain and most of the rest of Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Church-state “structural problem” took on a completely new form almost everywhere in Europe and in the newly independent states that had once constituted Spain’s American empire.

Now, the Church found itself struggling, under the new conditions imposed by the emergence of national, independent, republican polities, to recover its autonomy and self-government from state-imposed limitations, while retaining its wealth, privileges, and the monopoly on the spiritual oversight of the body politic that it had enjoyed under the monarchies. In both struggles, the Church in Latin America failed almost completely, for in most of the region the Church was recaptured by national states whose makers were as committed to asserting absolute authority as their regalist predecessor had been. But now, the Church also lost most of its traditional privileges as well, including its wealth and its monopoly on spiritual matters. Impoverished and dependent on secularized states whose governments were often hostile to religion, relieved of its responsibility for charitable and educational works, shorn of its official status

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2 Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4-5. A very recent reiteration of the Church’s simultaneous insistence on the separation of religion and the state, and its own right to the moral oversight of the political sphere, can be found in the just-published Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), which observes that the Church “requires that the political community guarantee the Church the space needed to carry out her mission. For her part, the Church has no particular area of competence concerning the structures of the political community: ‘The Church respects the legitimate authority of the democratic order and is not entitled to express preferences for this or that institutional or constitutional solution,’ nor does it belong to her to enter into questions of the merit of political programmes, except as concerns their religious or moral implications. . . . Precisely because her mission embraces all of human reality, the Church, sensing that she is ‘truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history’, claims the freedom to express her moral judgment on this reality, whenever it may be required to defend the fundamental rights of the person or for the salvation of souls.” See §§424, 426; the quoted citations are to *Centesimus Annus* §47 (1991), and *Gaudium et spes* §1 (1965), respectively.
as the spiritual overseer of the body politic, the Church in both Latin America and Europe responded around 1880 by strengthening its ties to Rome, reinforcing papal authority and shaking off the legacy of state domination. An ultramontane approach to evangelization led to the founding of new schools, missions and charitable institutions as part of the bid to re-establish the Church’s independent authority. In Latin America and elsewhere, the ultramontane attitude encouraged Catholics to break away from traditional ways of thinking and to fashion what Jean Meyer called a “critique” of the new forms of state and society that were enveloping the Church.3

I. Catholic Social Doctrine: A New Tool of Moral and Spiritual Oversight

I would like to extend Meyer’s argument and propose that this “critique” really also represented a bold attempt by the Church to recover its traditional role as the spiritual overseer of state and society. And a new instrument was just being created in Rome itself for the expression of that role. The instrument became known as the Church’s “social doctrine,” a body of thought whose development and application would flourish during the Cold War. By social doctrine, the Church means answers to “questions concerning life in society,” as enunciated in a series of proclamations that famously began with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical letter “Rerum novarum” on 15 May 1892.4 What was remarkable about that encyclical, as well as those that followed it in the same tradition, was the way it extended the scope of the church’s self-appointed oversight responsibilities beyond the state itself to include all of society, particularly its economic dimension — an extension expressed in the Church’s numerous references to the state’s responsibility for ensuring economic and social justice.5 What has given the Church’s social doctrine a certain sting, making it something more than mere oratory and arousing the ire of political leaders who found themselves too closely associated with the evils that it condemned, was its reassertion of the Church’s traditional teaching that under certain conditions, armed resistance to oppression by political authority is legitimate.6

In this paper, I plan to show how the Church in Latin America applied its social doctrine in responding to Cold War communism as conditions changed over the course of that war. What did the Church seek to achieve in opposing communism, and how did it justify its position? What methods did it use? Precisely how the Church’s participation in that conflict affected its course and outcome will forever be open to speculation, though it seems clear enough that, at certain moments, the Church’s social doctrine played a significant role in its unfolding (and not always in ways that were hostile to communism), to judge by the strong reactions that the Church’s


4 The doctrine was recently codified in Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church; the quoted short definition is in Cardinal Angelo Sodano’s prefatory letter, p. xvii.

5 This outlook was luminously restated in the latest papal encyclical, Benedict XVI’s “Deus Caritas Est,” §28, of 25 December 2005, which repeated the Church’s longstanding view that, while church and state properly operate in separate spheres, those spheres are “always interrelated” because the state’s task of serving justice leads it to a meeting with faith, which “liberates reason from its blind spots,” and “enables reason to do its work more effectively. This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place,” as it seeks to “purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgement and attainment of what is just . . . to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice.” The Church “is duty-bound to offer . . . her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically.”

6 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, §§ 400-401, citing St. Thomas Aquinas and other authorities.
exhortations elicited from those in positions of economic and political power. In trying to answer these questions, I will focus on cases of Cold War conflict in two Latin America countries, Guatemala and Chile, places where communism or its ideological consorts achieved their greatest strength in the region during the Cold War through constitutional means rather than through violent social revolution, at two very different moments of the Cold War. We will compare the two responses to one another, and briefly compare both to the Church’s response to the only two successful Latin American cases of violent social revolution, Cuba and Nicaragua. Nowhere else in Latin America, outside of these four countries, did communism or its close allies ever appear so threatening to the defenders of liberalism during the Cold War. The urgency of the threat was certified by the fact that in all four cases, the U.S. government undertook extraordinary covert and overt measures to defeat communism and defend liberalism.

In order to keep these four cases in perspective, let us recall that they constitute a very small subset of a much larger conflict, one that pitted two children of the Enlightenment — liberalism and communism — against one another for about a century and a half, roughly from 1848 to 1990. In Latin America, it was a conflict that mattered little until the stabilization of the Soviet Union and its international apparatus in the 1920s. But it was not until the late 1940s and the onset of the Cold War that this grand conflict began to dominate and even to define politics and political change in Latin America. Let us also recall that it was not the same conflict in Latin America that it was in the United States. There were really two kinds of Cold War conflicts, and each of them coincided, more or less, with two world geographical zones. The first kind of conflict was ideological, a battle over the truth of two opposed constellations of ideas; it was most conspicuous across the upper regions of the Northern hemisphere, from the United States and Western Europe, to the socialist bloc countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, across China and to Japan. Here, advanced capitalist and communist countries engaged one another in a ceaseless war of ideas, while managing to avoid large-scale violence among themselves, with the exception of the Korean War, which in any case entered its current period of latency quite early, in 1953. The second kind of conflict was basically limited to areas south of the Tropic of Cancer, where it was more social than ideological, pitting the poor against the rich, employers against urban workers, estate owners against peasants. This conflict was the late-twentieth century version of what nineteenth-century pundits euphemistically referred to as “the social question.” Of course this second conflict was also a war of ideas. But it was just here that the ideas that divided the North found expression in a real war of death and destruction among class-based collectivities of all kinds. Its ultimate manifestation was the guerrilla war, or the “war of national liberation” as its partisans on the side of the poor began calling it after the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. While the forces of national liberation typically enjoyed the support of the communist bloc of nations, their adversaries normally counted on the help of the liberal states, led by the United States. It was this second conflict, where the Cold War turned hot, that consumed Latin America during the Cold War, and so it is this version of Cold War conflict that will occupy our attention here.

Dianne Kirby has recently accused historians of the Cold War of having “systematically neglected” the role of religion in that conflict. In her view, the Cold War “was one of history’s great religious wars, a global conflict between the god-fearing and the godless.” Religious beliefs shaped both perceptions of the Soviet Union and responses to it, as anticommunism, especially in the United States, drew heavily on religious symbols and values to mobilize people against communism, whose Achilles heel was atheism. Kirby, however, is clearly not interested in how the content of religious beliefs affected believers’ views of communism. Rather, she wishes to

highlight the way that Western governments exploited Christian values in order to manipulate believers into becoming fervent anticommunists. But this approach to the role of religion in the Cold War is defective in three ways: First, it assumes that the leaders of Western governments could not themselves have sincerely shared Christian values; second, it implies that Christians are naive and easily led—in a word, too stupid to see that they were being manipulated; and third, in the end her argument presupposes that Christian values, whatever they are, could not by themselves have been capable of convincing Christians to oppose communism. Far from illuminating the role of religion in the Cold War, the approach taken by Kirby (and the other contributors to the volume she edited) distorts and obscures it. Her premises reveal an anti-religious prejudice that is widely shared in the academic community.

In Latin America, religion has always meant, above all other possible contenders, the Roman Catholic Church. An organization with a worldwide membership and a field of action which it has always considered to be both universal and eternal, the Catholic Church was, I think, the original embodiment of transnational enterprise. Its existence predated the nineteenth-century origins of the long war between liberalism and communism by approximately eighteen centuries. As both a stern critic of liberalism and an implacable foe of communism, the Church was everywhere deeply engaged in both the ideological and the social conflicts of the Cold War, and anticommunism became a core element of its social doctrine. Two years before the publication of Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*, the Church issued its first explicit condemnation of communism and socialism, in 1846. In 1878, Leo XIII called socialism a “deadly plague”; to Pius XI, writing in 1937, it was a “satanic scourge.” The latter’s encyclical letter “Divini redemptoris” of 19 March 1937 supplied the definitive Catholic position on communism as the Cold War approached, and would therefore become the Latin American Church’s principal reference on the subject, at least until the 1960s. Communism, Pius XI wrote, was an “all too imminent danger . . . which aims at upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization.” He accused communists of advancing a perverted notion of justice that stemmed from the false claim that “there is in the world only one reality, matter”; to communists, even human society is nothing but “a phenomenon and form of matter.” They falsely claim that the wellspring of history is class conflict, and so “the class struggle with its consequent violent hate and destruction takes on the aspects of a crusade for the progress of humanity. On the other hand, all other forces

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9 All references to “the Church” in this paper refer to the Roman Catholic Church. Positions and doctrines attributed here to “the Church” or that are qualified as “Catholic” refer to official teachings and pronouncements of the Holy See, or to official statements by bishops or national conferences of bishops, who normally seek to apply the Holy See’s teachings in a particular local or national setting. It is a slight exaggeration to speak of “the Guatemalan Church” or “the Chilean Church.” At the national level, primary authority is exercised not by a single man but by a variety of diocesan bishops who are responsible for affairs only within the territory of their diocese. While dioceses are typically grouped into provinces under the supervision of the archbishop of the principal (or “metropolitan”) see of the province, his influence over the province’s bishops is limited. Religious orders have a separate hierarchy, though like the bishops they are ultimately subject to the pope. Even in those cases when the Church of a particular country is strongly identified with a particular position in a given conflict, it is normally a position enunciated by the archbishop who heads the country’s principal metropolitan see, and his views may be at odds with those of other prelates, not to mention with those of individual parish priests or the heads and members of religious orders. In recent decades, many countries have established national-level bishops’ conferences which take positions on issues, but their decisions cannot bind any particular bishop or priest, nor can the policy positions adopted by the continental organization of Latin American bishops, the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM).
whatever, as long as they resist such systematic violence, must be annihilated as hostile to the human race.” Both these premises, and their sociological and anthropological implications, made communism the natural enemy of Christianity. The strongest evidence in favor of Pius XI’s argument was the way that communism was being applied in Russia, where “terrorism reigns today,” and where millions of people had been made “slaves” of the state. By then it was also evident that “Wherever communism and the radical Left came to power, the church was usually its main target and its main victim.”

Against communism, the Church initially sought unconditional surrender, as in Guatemala between 1944 and 1954. By the mid-1950s, however, the Church was taking note of the practical necessity of devising, in Eastern Europe and other places, a modus vivendi with particular communist regimes that had acquired authority over the lives of millions of the Catholic faithful. In Latin America, a similar passage from rigid opposition during the first stages of a communist takeover, to the practical necessity of seeking accommodation with it, would be repeated in the case of Cuba beginning in 1959. A decade later, in Chile, the country’s bishops practically welcomed the electoral victory of a socialist-communist governing coalition. Despite this evolution in the Church’s Cold War encounter with communism, there was never any doubt that communism’s thoroughgoing philosophical materialism, and its intolerance of religious practice and religiously-oriented institutions such as schools, made it a permanent adversary of Christianity and of all other religions that wished to preserve their adherents’ freedom of action and conscience. Even during the papacy of Paul VI (1963-1978), when the Church seemed most open to political and social change and even to collaboration with non-Christian movements, the faithful were reminded by that pope that

the Christian who wishes to live his faith in a political activity which he thinks of as service cannot without contradicting himself adhere to ideological systems which radically or substantially go against his faith and his concept of man. He cannot adhere to the Marxist ideology, to its atheistic materialism, to its dialectic of violence and to the way it absorbs individual freedom in the collectivity, at the same time denying all transcendence to man and his personal and collective history.

Condemnations of communism were almost always paired with harshly critical evaluations of liberalism, for the philosophical materialism that underlay communism was also a prominent (though certainly not necessary) feature of liberalism. But liberalism seemed to be reformable, not only as an ideology of individual autonomy and secularism (with optional anticlerical and even antireligious tendencies), but also in its practical expressions in the economic realm (in the form of capitalism) and in politics (in the form of majority rule). While the period of the Church’s most serious opposition to liberalism is usually associated with liberalism’s nineteenth-century adolescence, during the Cold War its hostility to liberalism at times seemed no less fierce than its opposition to communism. Repeating earlier papal critiques of liberalism, Pius XI in “Divini redemptoris” of 1937 moved adroitly from an attack on communism to warning against “liberalistic individualism, which subordinates society to the selfish use of the individual,” calling for “the


infusion of social justice and the sentiment of Christian love into the social-economic order." In the same apostolic letter in which he condemned Marxism in 1971, Paul VI also warned the Christian that just as he cannot “adhere to the Marxist ideology, . . .

nor can he adhere to the liberal ideology which believes it exalts individual freedom by withdrawing it from every limitation, by stimulating it through exclusive seeking of interest and power, and by considering social solidarities as more or less automatic consequences of individual initiatives, not as an aim and a major criterion of the value of the social organization. . . . At the very root of philosophical liberalism is an erroneous affirmation of the autonomy of the individual in his activity, his motivation and the exercise of his liberty. Hence, the liberal ideology likewise calls for careful discernment on their part.

What stands out about the Church’s views on both liberalism and communism are their continuity and coherence for more than a century and a half, well into the papacy of John Paul II. Thus it was that the Church in Latin America, from the early twentieth century, found itself fighting “on two fronts,” seeking a “third way” that would eventually become identified with Christian Democracy and — among a minority of Catholics after 1965 — with a sympathetic and even supportive view of social revolution, a position that would be sternly corrected during the papacy of John Paul II (1978-2005).

What made both communism and an unreformed liberalism unacceptable to the Church was that both were affronts to justice, and therefore obstacles to peace and reconciliation. The premise of that argument has not changed since it received its exemplary expression by St. Augustine in the fifth century: “The peace of all things lies in the tranquility of order; and order is the disposition of equal and unequal things in such a way as to give to each its proper place.” The last phrase constitutes the classic definition of justice. Thus, peace, or good order, is the fruit of giving to each his due. “Vulgar pacificism,” as John Courtney Murray called it — that is, peace for the sake of peace alone, or peace as the mere absence of war — is thus ruled out, for Augustine roundly denounced the “unjust peace” of the proud and wicked tyrant. In 1972, Pope Paul VI cited the Jewish origin of this doctrine (Isaiah 32:17: “And the effect of righteousness will be peace”) and then helpfully translated it into a contemporary idiom that would find its way onto American bumper stickers: “We repeat this today in a more incisive and dynamic formula: ‘If you want Peace, work for Justice’.” Thus, the same reasoning that led the Church to demand of capitalist employers that they respect the dignity of their workers by paying a fair wage and providing basic social amenities, also led to the rejection of communism, whose philosophy and programs aimed to deprive rich and poor alike of their due, in both material and spiritual terms. If a

14 Paul VI, Apostolic Letter “Octogesima Adveniens,” §§ 26, 35.
measure of justice could be injected into capitalism, the Church reasoned, then moves toward reconciliation among the contending social classes might follow, and the appeal of communism would die out.

That was, in a nutshell, the Catholic response to communism, not just during the Cold War but even long before the founding of the Soviet Union. Thus, to the capitalist class, Catholic social doctrine has been a doubled-edged sword. While employers welcomed the Church’s opposition to communism and to communism’s diverse ideological and political progeny, they tended to discard reminders of what Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) called their “obligations of justice” to their own employees. Nor did they praise the conditional way in which the Church defended the right to private property, which also had to serve the common good. Workers in capitalist countries too found cause for dismay as well as solace. While the Church consistently supported their efforts to organize unions and act collectively for higher pay and better working conditions, it firmly opposed the use of violence, as well as language and programs congruent with marxist theories of class struggle or collectivist solutions to social and economic problems. To the Church, the end of any given “social justice” initiative adopted by communism (or its allies on the Left) was the destruction of one class and dictatorial rule by the vanguard of another class. In Catholicism, however, the end of social justice was a peace deep enough to let the state fulfill its main obligation, namely, the promotion of the common good, and by the common good was meant the creation and preservation of conditions that allowed groups and individuals to “reach their fulfillment.”

If to liberals the individual was everything, to the communists and socialists, the individual counted for nothing. Neither view was acceptable to the Church, which therefore refused to be the unconditional ally of any political tendency during the Cold War in Latin America. As a result, the Left ritually accused it of selling out to the class enemy, even as the Left itself opportunistically associated itself with whatever elements of social doctrine it found congruent with its own program, such as calls for land reform or the defense of workers’ rights. The Right, meanwhile, applauded the Church’s defense of property rights and economic freedom, while routinely accusing it of fomenting social revolution and betraying the faith.

While the core dogmas of social doctrine never changed, its form and application evolved in three important ways in the 1960s, and these were especially relevant in Latin America. First, in its principal doctrinal statements, the tone of hostility to communism and marxist thought became less strident, a development that no doubt reflected an awareness of the sudden diversity of leftwing political movements that emerged in places like Latin America. Second, statements on social doctrine revealed a new awareness of the depth and complexity of social injustices in developing countries, a sign of the great surge in interest in underdevelopment among social scientists and public policymakers alike in that decade. Third, the Church began to highlight the role of the laity in implementing — and living out — its social doctrine, a change in emphasis that had begun under Pope Pius XII (1939-1958), and had the effect of shifting the emphasis from exhortatory letters handed down to the faithful by the episcopate, to encouraging real social action by all Catholics. Institutional changes within the Church also contributed to these new developments in the application of social doctrine. The first institutional move began with the convocation, from 1962 to 1965, of the Church’s Twenty-First Ecumenical Council of bishops, known as Vatican II, which sought to present Church teaching in ways that responded more accurately to the vast social changes that had occurred since the previous council (1869-1870). “Renewal” or “aggiornamento” was Vatican II’s byword, and as such it inspired experimentation in both doctrine and practice. The

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19 “Lay apostles should be directed into economic, social, and political life,” said Pius XII, address, "Guiding Principles of the Lay Apostolate," 5 October 1957.
second institutional development was the establishment in 1955 of the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM — “Latin American Episcopal Council”), whose purpose was to study issues of special relevance to Latin America and organize meetings of all the region’s bishops. CELAM’s second general meeting at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 was, according to one prominent historian of the Latin American Church, “the central event” in its twentieth-century history, for it was there that the bishops committed themselves to a program of social change that had already developed two wings, a reformist and a revolutionary one.  

Taken together, these changes began transforming the Catholic Church in Latin America from a mere inspirer and advocate of social change to an instigator and direct participant in social change. As a seasoned historian of the contemporary Church remarked in 1971, “A new wave of Catholic activity in Latin America has gradually but decisively shifted to support widespread and massive social change. The days of ethereal spirituality and apolitical clerical seclusion are gone. . . More and more actively, . . . the Church has come to back efforts for agrarian reform, for a more egalitarian society, and for broader political participation. . . . Churchmen . . . can significantly influence the speed and the direction of social innovation.” While the way in which the Church’s social doctrine was presented and applied changed substantially, its principal claim — that peace depends on justice — and the philosophical and theological underpinnings of that claim remained untouched. In the classical tradition of metaphysical and ethical realism, all things — men and women, states and their laws — are understood to have a particular nature or essence that discloses their proper end; a natural law written on the hearts of all conveys knowledge of objective standards of right and wrong, good and evil, whether the subject is the state, society, or the individual. Theologically, Catholic social doctrine has always been subordinate to the teaching that there is a freedom greater than freedom from any conceivable earthly oppression, and that whatever earthly miseries the Church’s social doctrine may seek to alleviate or correct, they are in the final analysis, manifestations of man’s permanently sinful nature and his need for personal redemption. The point was reiterated in 1986, mainly for the benefit of Catholics who, in the judgment of the Vatican, were placing mere social liberation above personal liberation.  

Behind the duty to do justice in social life is the duty to love, the greatest commandment in the Christian faith, and the one that remains dogmatically unhindered by qualifications of social standing or economic class, not to mention race, gender, age, disability, or political affiliation. Catholic social doctrine, therefore, is best understood as a particular dimension of the evangelium or glad tidings, and as such, it naturally resists appropriation for other purposes. It is just here that we see the full relevance to our topic of the Church’s longstanding insistence on the separation of religion and the state, on the one hand, and the Church’s duty to

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22 “Through his Cross and Resurrection, Christ has brought about our Redemption, which is liberation in the strongest sense of the word, since it has freed us from the most radical evil, namely sin and the power of death.” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Libertatis conscientia, Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation,” 22 March 1986, §3. In 1971, Pope Paul VI reminded readers of his apostolic letter “Octogesima Adveniens,” §45, that “Today men yearn to free themselves from need and dependence. But this liberation starts with the interior freedom that men must find again with regard to their goods and their powers; they will never reach it except through a transcendent love for man, and, in consequence, through a genuine readiness to serve. Otherwise, as one can see only too clearly, the most revolutionary ideologies lead only to a change of masters; once installed in power in their turn, these new masters surround themselves with privileges, limit freedom and allow other forms of injustice to become established.”
oversee and correct the latter's moral defects. The notion that personal salvation comes before social liberation is rooted in a core teaching about life in society that Christianity inherited from Judaism, namely, that human society and human law depend “on an order which transcends politics and economics.” Psalm 2 gives the classical expression of that outlook, when it reminds its listeners that when the “kings of the earth” seek to challenge God's authority over them, “He who sits in the heavens laughs” and will “break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.” That view of the body politic was not in the least modified by the aggiornamento of Vatican II, whose innovative language did not alter the fact that the Church "still refuses to subscribe to the modern idea of the autonomy of politics," as Paul Portier observed. In fact, Vatican II explicitly confirmed the centuries-old teaching that public authority originates in the divine order and not in human will, that public authority must be exercised in conformity with the natural law, and that violations of the natural law by governments not only de-legitimize them but open the way for a legitimate right of resistance by the governed.24

If fundamental continuity marked by discontinuities in emphasis and application could be said to characterize Church social doctrine after the 1950s, the same may also be said of that doctrine’s principle nemesis. Until the late 1950s, “communism” was fairly easy to define in Latin America. It was the political movement of Marxism-Leninism, whose exact tenets and political strategies had been authoritatively defined by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. National communist parties were basically affiliates of the USSR’s party, and the leaders of national parties in places like Peru, Mexico, Guatemala and Chile routinely held up the Soviet Union as the model society to which their work aspired. Until around 1960, to be identified with “the Left” in Latin America meant loyalty, or at least sympathy with, the aims of the national communist party, except for the odd Trotskyite faction. At that time, when the Church or anyone else denounced communism, there was little doubt what it meant in Latin America, for European “democratic socialism” or “social democracy” was still largely unknown there. Then, in 1959, Fidel Castro’s triumphant social revolution in Cuba not only disproved the communists' claim that Latin America was unripe for armed struggle, but contradicted orthodox communist doctrine in other ways: it was carried out over the objections of the Cuban Communist Party; the ideology of Castro’s movement was not marxist or even vaguely socialist but liberal-democratic; his movement was strongly nationalistic at a time when communists were deeply suspicious of nationalistic appeals; and the movement was led not by a disciplined vanguard party of professional revolutionaries but by a 32-year-old caudillo. Suddenly, “communism” seemed an inexact term for the flowering of social-revolutionary organizations across the region, led by impatient young men and women who sought to imitate Castro, and who borrowed Marxist-Leninist doctrine as it suited them, paid little attention to Moscow, and opposed on the urgency and legitimacy of armed struggle as the only effective response to social injustice. “Armed struggle” had not been part of the political lexicon of communist parties since the 1930s. In response to the outbreak of insurgency throughout Latin America, and to Ché Guevara’s call in 1966 to “create two, three many Vietnams,” the armed forces took power almost everywhere in Latin America during the 1960s, imposing harsh dictatorships that often ruled by torture and assassination. Thus, just as Vatican II began to meet, the Church’s bishops were called on to consider the newly-felt urgency for rapid social change in Latin America, to make distinctions among marxist-inspired political movements, and to face what at times appeared to be an even greater enemy of social justice than communism — the military-led regimes of “national security,” whose legitimacy was doubtful and whose commitment to justice was, to the say the least, highly selective.

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Communism, which had animated so many of the political and military upheavals of the
Cold War, collapsed between 1989 to 1991. In Europe and the Soviet Union, communism was the
victim of the very “popular forces” whose interests it had always claimed to be advancing and
defending. In falling, it brought down with it the varieties of marxist ideologies that had sprung up
after 1959 in Latin America, where except for Cuba, the Left had “failed miserably” to achieve its
goals, in the words of a sympathetic historian.\(^\text{25}\) Whether communism in Europe succumbed in
significant part because of encouragement by the Church and its Polish pope remains a matter of
debate among international-relations specialists.\(^\text{26}\) What remains obvious to all is that communism
today is an ideology whose few remaining adherents are more likely to evoke pity and ridicule than
dread. In other words, the ideological war is over. The survivor, in the Northern hemisphere, is a
reformed capitalism that has managed to preserve the essential conditions for its existence,
namely, respect for private property rights and personal freedom. On the other hand, the “social
question” that predated the Cold War by a century, and that turned the Cold War into a hot war in
Africa, Asia and Latin America from the 1950s to the 1980s, has not been resolved. Social
inequities seem wider and more intractable than ever in many places in the global South. While
the communist solution to the social question seems, at least for now, to be a relic of a bygone era,
the same cannot be said of the Catholic Church and its social doctrine, insofar as it continues to
guide the views of the world’s 1.1 billion Roman Catholics.

The following discussion of the Church’s confrontation with communism in constitutional
settings in Guatemala and Chile brings together two countries with radically different national
histories, and spans a period, from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s, that encompassed the
changes in both communism and Church social doctrine discussed above. These two cases offer,
therefore, rich opportunities for comparison with each other, as well as with Cuba and Nicaragua,
that will be taken up in the conclusion of the paper.

II. Confronting Communism in a Constitutional Setting: Guatemala, 1944-1954

Until 1944, Guatemala had a been governed by a series of dictatorships that succeeded
one another according to the fortunes of civil war and *coup d’état*. Political rivalries were
organized around leading personalities and their associated economic interests rather than
coherent ideologies. The armed forces had come to play the decisive role in settling political
contests, but it was also deeply divided and factionalized. The axis of the country’s economy was
the production of bananas and coffee for export. The banana business was controlled by the U.S.-
based United Fruit Co., which had also become the country’s largest single landowner and
employer, the owner of its railroad system, and the principal investor in other sectors of the
economy. Illiteracy, poverty and underemployment were the lot of the majority of the country’s
inhabitants, half or more of whom identified themselves as Mayan Indians. With the collapse of the
thirteen-year dictatorship of Gen. Jorge Ubico in 1944, a faction of the armed forces launched a
rapid transition to the first free elections in the country’s history, and the onset of a ten-year period
of genuine political freedom, contested elections, and government-initiated social change under the

\(^{25}\) Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia unarmed : the Latin American left after the Cold War* (New York: Vintage

\(^{26}\) Few international relations scholars seem to consider the Church’s role in the collapse of communism in
Europe to be more than extremely marginal, if not irrelevant. One exception is Kent, *The Lonely Cold War of
Pope Pius XII: The Roman Catholic Church and the Division of Europe, 1943-1950*, p. 3, who argues that
“The election of Karol Wojtyła, the archbishop of Cracow, as pope in 1978 “instigated the public process
leading to the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union.” Another exception is George
Weigel; see, among other works of his, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of
administrations of two Left-of-center presidents, Juan José Arévalo (1945-1950) and Jacobo Arbenz (1950-1954). At the same time, Guatemala’s Communist Party took advantage of the opportunity to recover from the harsh repression of the Ubico administration by reorganizing and recruiting new members. Guatemala’s first experiment in electoral democracy ended abruptly in 1954, when a U.S.-backed insurgency frightened the armed forces into withdrawing its support from Arbenz, who had formally legalized the country’s communist party (which operated openly after 1944) and accorded it a leading role in his government. It dominated the country’s trade unions, and its membership had risen from a few hundred in 1951 to more than 5,000 in 1954. The growing influence of the communist party was probably the main reason for the covert intervention of the United States, although Arbenz’ land reform initiative, which deprived United Fruit of much of its land, also motivated the attack.27

The Catholic Church in Guatemala had been all but destroyed in the 1870s by an anticlerical government that expelled nearly all foreign priests and foreign members of religious orders, expelled all religious communities and confiscated their goods, nationalized all church property (including even church buildings) and secularized all education. All Church expenses were covered by the government. Except for the relaxation of the ban on foreign priests, these policies were maintained by all subsequent governments, making Guatemala second only to Mexico in the severity of Latin American anticlerical legislation. By 1949, the Church had 120 priests for 3 million people, the same number it had in the 1870s. Besides being extremely poor, it was also fettered by constant government supervision. The anti-clerical laws of the 1870s were still the law of Guatemala, wrote a U.S. historian of Guatemalan church-state relations who did research there in the late 1940s. “The Church in Guatemala has never been, and is not now free.”28

Thus, the response of the Guatemalan Church to communism during the early period was strongly influenced by the fact that communism in the 1940s and 50s bloomed under the protection and even encouragement of a traditionally anticlerical state. Church and state had been enemies, and never allies, for seven decades. The decision of Arévalo and Arbenz to reverse Ubico’s repression of communism meant that the Church’s response to communism there could not logically exclude the state that had welcomed the communist presence in Guatemala and deprived the Church of its freedom for more seven decades. A second factor influencing the Church’s response to communism was the fact that communism in Guatemala was acquiring new privileges at the precise moment of communism’s sweeping victories in Eastern Europe and China, victories that incidentally crushed the Catholic Church and other religious communities in those countries. Third, since all communist parties were understood to operate as the remote instruments of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, reliable knowledge of life under the dictatorship of that party could be used to heighten opposition to local communist parties. For example, the fate of the peasantry in the Soviet Union was a matter of special interest in a country like Guatemala, where the majority of the population continued to depend on subsistence farming for a living. Between 1929 and 1932, the Soviet Communist Party undertook a deliberate policy of mass murder, deportation and rural collectivization that together resulted in the deaths of about 7.5 million of peasants. On top of that came the “terror-famine” of 1932-33, imposed on the peasantry of the


28 Mary Patricia Holleran, *Church and State in Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), Ch. 3, 235-238, 254;
Ukraine and Kuban and responsible for the deaths of another 7 million. All told, Soviet peasant deaths owing to government repression between 1930 and 1937 came to about 14.5 million, according to Robert Conquest. In Russia, Archibishop Mariano Rossell Arellano of Guatemala City observed in 1955, “the regime has murdered more peasants in five years than all the social injustices of the last century.”

With the inauguration of President Arévalo on 15 March 1945, Guatemalan politics entered an unheard-of period of effervescence and freedom; no political tendency was excluded. In response to the rapid appearance of communist party organizers, three members of the Catholic hierarchy signed a joint pastoral letter on 1 October that prefigured almost everything that the Guatemalan Church would say about communism, both until the overthrow of the Arbenz government and beyond. It was already obvious, they wrote, that instead of seeking to fulfill its promise to restore the citizenship rights of the people, the leaders of the “revolution of 1944” were instead seeking to legitimize communism. The signers condemned the country’s “economic dictatorship,” which had been designed to provide immense rewards for the few at the cost of the welfare of the many. Guatemala’s “oppressive capitalism and unhappy proletariat” had only made the country ripe for “sedition and massacre: atheistic and savage communism,” whose sin was to deny God and “reduce man to a simple producing machine” while destroying the family. They specifically condemned the activities of the communist-controlled labor union, the Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina, while praising the formation of a new union, the Liga Obrera de Guatemala, which was inspired by Church’s social doctrine. They warned Catholic employers of their duty to “Christianize economic life” by going to the limits in seeking equity and “just distribution” while overcoming their own selfishness with a spirit of moderation and Christian charity.

In March 1946, Winston Churchill delivered his Iron Curtain speech in Fulton, Missouri. As class conflict sharpened in Guatemala, Archbishop Rossell defended the Church in September against the accusation that it had allied itself with the “capitalist oppressors.” The Church’s social program was based on “the proper use of wealth” and its central tendency was not the destruction of capital but the uplifting of the proletariat by means of “the just redistribution of wealth.” In Guatemala, it was evident that “the just demands of workers and professionals” were clashing with “traditional notions of property and capital.” Justice and equity are the foundations of social peace, and works are worth more than mere words, he added, pointing to the responsibilities of both government and the powerful to collaborate in seeking justice.


31 Mariano Rossell y Arellano, Jorge García y Caballeros, and Raymundo M. Martín, Carta pastoral colectiva del episcopado de la provincia eclesiástica de Guatemala sobre la amenaza comunista en nuestra patria (Guatemala City: Tip. Sánchez & De Guise, 1945).

32 Mariano Rossell y Arellano, A las clases laborante y patronal; mensaje del arzobispo de Guatemala, Monseñor Mariano Rossell Arellano (Guatemala City, Guatemala: Imprenta Hispania, 1946).
laboring classes” and “the most advanced social justice.” Communism will fail wherever workers are treated with justice and decorum. . . . So vote for those who will guarantee the just social rights and improvement of the laboring classes.” Finally, he admonished the faithful to avoid insulting or spiteful language or conduct against their enemies. “We don’t hate the sinner but the sin.”33 His Advent letter that year—which was also the year of the Soviet Union’s drive for total control of Eastern Europe—re-emphasized that social peace depended on social justice, which he defined as “giving to each that which he is owed as a human person, made in the divine image and likeness.” In Guatemala, thousands live in poverty, in hunger, and in rags; thousands suffer because they have no medicine; thousands live in the worst ignorance. “Only a crusade of social justice” can establish the basis for a peaceful society. In the same letter, he returned to another recurrent theme: that the injustices of the economic structure were owing to the inherently unjust policies of the liberal dictatorships that had governed the country since the 1870s. He also took the opportunity to remind his readers that those who were accusing the Catholic clergy of exploiting the people must have forgotten that the Church in Guatemala owned no property whatsoever, all of it having been confiscated after 1871 by the state, which still forbade priests from engaging in any type of trade or business.34

Six weeks before the invasion of 17 June 1954 that toppled the Arbenz government, Archbishop Rossell called on all Guatemalans to confront communism “with the most effective weapon that we have: social justice and Christian charity.” Struggling to correct social injustices is more than a “mere devotion” or “pious practice” but “an imperative moral obligation.” Russia was no model of social justice, for it was “the country that, since the beginning of the world, has murdered the greatest number of workers and peasants.” All told, millions have been systematically murdered in countries governed by communism, the same ideology that was then choking Guatemala “like a gigantic octopus.”35

After Arbenz’ overthrow and the suppression of the communist party and its leftwing allies by the U.S.-installed military government, Archbishop Rossell continued to call for social reforms to benefit the poor majority, and denounced as sharply as ever the policies of Guatemala’s governments, which almost without exception, he declared in 1955, have been “anti-Christian and dictatorial.” Calling for a thoroughgoing land reform, he conceded that Arbenz’ land reform law had not been entirely unjust. Its greatest defect was to deny its peasant beneficiaries the right to own the land they worked, which they held in usufruct only. Moreover, he charged, it had been applied capriciously for political purposes by the communists and resulted in violent conflict. Looking back on his battle against communism from 1944 to 1954, he said his main tactic had been to insist on two points: first, that it was not possible to be Catholic and support communists, and second, that “the doctrine of the Church is more advanced than that of communism itself in regards to social justice,” a claim that “drove the communists crazy.” The Church’s social doctrine, he said, was more advanced because when the communists demanded a minimum wage, the Church had already gone on record in favor of a family wage; the Church favored a land reform that provided

33 Mariano Rossell y Arellano, _Instrucción pastoral de Monseñor Mariano Rossell Arellano Arzobispo de Guatemala al pueblo Católico Sobre el Deber y Condiciones del Sufragio_ (Guatemala City: Tipografía Sánchez & De Guise, 1948)

34 Mariano Rossell y Arellano, _Carta pastoral del Excelentísimo y Reverendísimo Señor Don Mariano Rossell Arellano Arzobispo de Guatemala Sobre la Justicia Social, Fundamento del Bienestar Social_ (Guatemala City: Unión Tipografica, Castañeda, Avila y Cia, 1948)

35 Mariano Rossell y Arellano, _Carta pastoral del Excelentísimo y Reverendísimo Señor Don Mariano Rossell Arellano Arzobispo de Guatemala Sobre los Avances del Comunismo en Guatemala_ (Guatemala City: Acción Católica Guatemalteca, 1954)
III. Confronting Communism in a Constitutional Setting: Chile, 1970-1973

The electoral triumph of Socialist Party presidential candidate Salvador Allende in 1970 opened a three-year period of revolutionary reforms that sharply polarized Chile, ruined its economy, incited violent disorder, and finally ended in a military dictatorship that destroyed the Left and ruled the country until 1990, depriving its inhabitants of most political and human rights. The severity of the military’s response to the radical change and disorder of this brief period of Leftist government, and the duration of the dictatorship that it imposed on Chile, surprised everyone, even during an era famous for military rule in Latin America. Among all the Latin American countries up until that time, Chile’s record of stable, constitutional, civilian government was the best. While it was far from fully democratic — the rural poor, for example, were largely disenfranchised — Chile had for decades exhibited a consistency in its tolerance for ideological diversity and political freedom, and a corresponding intolerance for interruptions in constitutional order, that was uncommon elsewhere in the region. By the mid-1950s, for example, in no other Latin American country had a Communist Party participated longer or more actively in national politics, and among Chile’s wage workers, the Communist Party had already established itself as “the principal political force.”

Chile’s political exceptionalism had a religious counterpart. While anti-religious laws still hobbled the freedom of the Catholic Church in most of Latin America, Chile shared with Brazil and Uruguay the distinction of having achieved, with minimal conflict, a separation of Church and state that also allowed the Church to operate without governmental interference. Both its moral and political influence soared as a result. In the 1930s, the Church shook off its longstanding association with the Conservative Party and became especially influential in secondary and university education, in trade unions, and above all in the Christian Democratic (CD) Party, which

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36 Rossell y Arellano, Conferencia del Excelentísimo y Reverendísimo Monseñor Mariano Rossell Arellano Arzobispo de Guatemala en el Tercer Congreso Católico de la Vida Rural el 21 de abril de 1955, en la ciudad de Panamá. The most thorough study of Arbenz’ land reform, Jim Handy’s Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala, 1944-1954 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), confirms that it set off a period of violent conflict in the countryside, not only between peasants and landlords, but among peasants, wage workers, and political bosses and their followers as well.


claimed Catholic social doctrine as its guiding ideology. In 1949 the Chilean bishops issued a strongly worded call for social justice, condemning the abusive treatment of rural workers by landowners, strongly endorsing the right of workers to unionize, and affirming their right to strike. These positions were "major breaks with the past," a student of the Chilean Church concluded. "There is a note of great urgency with which Catholics of power and wealth are asked to change their ways and, most significant, there is now explicit recognition of the need to change institutions." At the same time, the bishops repeated the traditional teaching on communism, citing "Divini Redemptoris" and reminding Catholics that they should not collaborate with communists.

In 1962, in the buildup to the 1964 presidential elections, the Chilean episcopate issued two pastoral letters that announced a new era in the application of Church social doctrine in Chile. Relying heavily on social-scientific studies of Chilean society, the letters referred repeatedly to the country's burden of social injustice. They were highly critical of the landowning elite for abusing the rights of their workers and called for both "reforms of the social structure" and "an authentic agrarian reform" that included the expropriation of large estates. On communism, these two pastorals took stands distinct from the 1949 pastoral. One letter made no reference to communism at all, which marked a sharp break with the past for the Chilean Church. The second letter reiterated the errors of communism, condemning collaboration with its partisans yet at the same time excluding from that prohibition joint action with anyone working toward goals that are "good." Since both letters were seen as leaning toward progressive change, they were bitterly denounced by the Right, upset by the bishops' decision to replace their much less threatening reminders to the rich of their obligations to the poor, with a recommendation for the expropriation of their property by the state.

With these letters, the hierarchy of the Church closely identified itself with the programs of the Christian Democratic party and its intensely anticommunist leader, Eduardo Frei, who was preparing to challenge Allende in the presidential election of 1964. Frei narrowly defeated Allende. Unable, however, to carry out the full scope of reforms he had promised, his popularity fell. In the 1970 presidential election campaign, the bishops went out of their way to distance themselves from the Christian Democratic Party, stressing the Church's neutrality. The Church even relaxed its 1962 admonition against collaboration with marxists, and insisted that Catholics were free to support any of the candidates. When Allende's Popular Unity coalition won the election, a bishops' delegation led by Cardinal Raul Silva Henríquez, the Archbishop of Santiago, went to Allende's home to congratulate him and promise their support for his program. Allende and his cabinet attended the traditional Te Deum for new presidents in the cathedral after Allende's swearing in on November 3, 1970. Nine days later, Archbishop Silva Henríquez made this remarkable comment to a Cuban journalist:

The basic reforms contained in the Popular Unity program are supported by the Church. ... I believe that socialism contains important Christian

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42 Landsberger, "Time, Persons, Doctrine: The Modernization of the Church in Chile," 89-93.

values, and in many respects is very superior to capitalism — the value it places on work, and the primacy of the person over against capital. I think that other extraordinary values of socialism are its break with the necessity and tyranny of the pursuit of profit and its ability to coordinate all levels of production. I believe that these ideals which it espouses are very close to the Church’s preferred goals in the organization of society.

Many bishops did sympathize with Allende’s programs to alleviate poverty, and in 1971, the country’s bishops published a pastoral letter stating that

[T]here are many forms of socialism. It is conceivable that among them there are some that are compatible with the spirit of Christianity. These would be the forms of socialism that can duly guarantee that the state will not be transformed into an uncontrollable and dictatorial force, and that can assure the promotion of the values of personal and social liberation which the Gospel of the Risen Christ proclaims.

The same letter noted, however, that Marxism-Leninism had so far only produced denials of human freedom, and it warned Catholics against accepting the atheism, class hatred and materialism that usually accompanied marxist socialism. Nevertheless, the bishops did not forbid Catholics from supporting Leftist parties or programs, as they had done in 1962. The letter made the Chilean hierarchy “the first national hierarchy in the world to admit publicly and as a body the compatibility” of some forms of Marxist-Leninist socialism with Catholic doctrine. It acknowledged the possibility of a Marxist-directed socialist transformation of their own country, and even committed the bishops to a spirit of cooperation with that policy, without actually endorsing any particular economic model. 44

During the first fifteen months of the Popular Unity government, the Catholic hierarchy “gave important official support for some programs of the government,” while the latter respected the Church’s traditional freedoms. Even as political strife intensified during Allende’s efforts to socialize the national economy in 1972, the bishops remained “openly supportive of the basic social and economic goals of the government.” Although tensions between the Church and the government intensified during its last five months in office over rising violence and an attempt by the government to take over the Catholic school system, the bishops never adopted an official policy of opposition. Meanwhile, the Christian Democratic Party had become the center of political opposition to the Unidad Popular coalition. After the coup of 11 September 1973 coup, the Christian Democrats and the Catholic Church found themselves allied once again, as the principal sources of opposition to the military regime that had overthrown Allende.45

IV. Conclusions

Only sixteen years separated the Guatemalan and the Chilean confrontations with communism. The Cold War would continue for another two decades after the Chilean coup d’état of 1973. And yet the Church’s response to communism in Chile differed remarkably from that in Guatemala. The strident and uncompromising hostility of Archbishop Rossell in Guatemala had been replaced by the Chilean bishops’ courteous neutrality and generosity of spirit, which at times seemed to spill over into sympathy for a socialistic solution to Chile’s problems. This difference was not primarily the result of the two countries’ distinct historical experiences; in 1949, the Chilean

44 Smith, The Church and Politics in Chile: Challenges to Modern Catholicism, 173-178.

45 Smith, The Church and Politics in Chile: Challenges to Modern Catholicism, 185, 195, 196; Sigmund, “Revolution, Counterrevolution, and the Catholic Church in Chile,,” 34-35; Dussel, "From the Second Vatican Council to the Present Day,,” 170.
bishops warned the faithful against cooperating with communism, just as Archbishop Rossell was
doing at that time in Guatemala. Rather, the difference was owing mainly to dramatic changes in
the nature of Latin American communism after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and in the way that
the Latin American governments reacted to those changes. The ideological and organizational
fragmentation of communism in the 1960s, and its new commitment to armed struggle in the form
of guerrilla insurgencies across the region, dramatized Latin America’s crisis of underdevelopment
and highlighted the sluggishness of the state’s response to the crisis. But the wave of insurgency
also triggered the rise of authoritarian military governments dedicated to eliminating the guerrilla
threat, and often enough, anyone suspected of sympathizing with it. If communism in Latin
America had so far existed as little more than a theoretical injustice (outside of Cuba), explicitly
anti-communist military regimes were now a real and present source of injustice. At their first
regional meeting in 1955, the Latin American bishops denounced communism in the same terms
that Archbishop Rossell had used; at their second meeting, in 1968, the Latin American bishops’
only reference to communism came in a derisive critique of the way that “some members of the
dominant sectors” resorted to “anticommunism” to justify repression.46

If the Latin American bishops were now minimizing the Church’s longstanding hostility to
communism, the same could not be said of the Church’s critique of liberalism. The passionate
denunciations of capitalism that had animated so many of Archbishop Rossell’s declarations
typified the Chilean bishops’ pastoral letters, as well as those of the Latin American bishops’
conference in 1968. The unavoidable implication was that Catholics should be open to considering
a structural transformation of the economy, and who else but marxist intellectuals, politicians and
revolutionaries were using just that sort of language in the 1960s? Yet in some ways, structural
transformation had been the import all along of the Church’s harsh critiques of capitalism and the
accompanying calls for vigorous state-directed intervention and reforms. This line is easily
detectable in Archbishop Rossell’s already-quoted statements, but it is more famously available in
Pope Pius XI’s seminal encyclical letter “Quadragesimo Anno” of 1931, issued to mark on the
fortieth anniversary of “Rerum Novarum.” Subtitled “On the Reconstruction of the Social Order,” it
proposed that, in order to overcome the “huge disparity between the few exceedingly rich and the
unnumbered propertyless,” wealth "ought to be so distributed among individual persons and
classes that the common advantage of all" so as to protect the common good. "By this law of
social justice, one class is forbidden to exclude the other from sharing in the benefits. . . .
Therefore, with all our strength and effort we must strive that at least in the future the abundant
fruits of production will accrue equitably to those who are rich and will be distributed in ample
sufficiency among the workers. . . . Unless utmost efforts are made without delay to put them [the
principles of “Rerum Novarum”] into effect, let no one persuade himself that public order, peace,
and the tranquility of human society can be effectively defended against agitators of revolution."47

In short, in its confrontation with both liberalism and communism in Latin America, at least
some bishops of the Catholic Church recognized in the reconstructed communism of the 1960s
some elements of a strategy for reforming liberalism. Yet not even the most Left-leaning Chilean
bishops considered ceding the centuries-old complement of the Church’s presumed right to moral
oversight of the body politic: namely, its insistence on the freedom of the Church from the
interference of the state in its spiritual, educational, and charitable duties toward the Catholic
faithful. But it was just that freedom that marxist governments, once in power, failed to respect. In
Chile, the Popular Unity government reneged on its promise to the bishops that it would leave
Catholic education alone, a reversal that chilled the bishops’ enthusiasm for Allende’s transition to

46 See “RIO DE JANEIRO (1955) Iª Conferencia General del CELAM” and “MEDELLIN (1968)” at
http://www.celam.org for the documents emitted at these conferences.
socialism. In Cuba, Fidel Castro’s program for social and economic development initially enjoyed the cautious support of most of the Catholic hierarchy, but as that program’s marxist and pro-Soviet character became increasingly evident, and as Castro’s government began to confiscate Church property and eliminate its freedom to educate the faithful, even Castro’s most avid supporters in the hierarchy turned against him. While supportive of many of the clear successes of the early stages of the revolution, such as the land reform, within eighteen months of the revolutionary victory, the Cuban bishops unanimously rejected the turn toward communism on the island. “Catholicism and communism correspond to two understandings of man and of the world that are totally opposed to each other, and which it will never be possible to reconcile,” they wrote. Castro responded by expelling priests, banning religious processions and stripping the Church of its communications media.48 In Nicaragua in 1979, the Sandinistas likewise gained power through a violent social revolution that received the support of the country’s bishops, who issued a pastoral letter in the midst of the fighting justifying armed struggle against the dictatorship of the Somoza family. But as in Cuba, while the hierarchy favored many of the social changes undertaken by the revolutionaries, it strongly opposed the marxism that accompanied them. The revolutionary government turned against the Church, setting off a bitter conflict that contributed to its fall from power in 1990.49 By then, the enthusiasm among Latin American bishops for leftist solutions to the crisis of underdevelopment had waned considerably, as had the attractions of the “theology of liberation” that emerged in the late 1960s. An investigation of the reasons for that retreat is a task that awaits historians of the region, but it seems likely that two conditions for that retreat were (1) the disagreeable outcome of marxist-directed social change, which included the loss of religious freedom in Cuba, sixteen years of authoritarian rule in Chile, and an exceptionally destructive civil war (the “contra war”) in Nicaragua; and (2) the transition to democratic rule and the withdrawal of the military from government that began in the early 1980s.

What dominated the Church’s response to communism in Latin America, from the first days of the Cold War to the last, was its insistence on the absolute priority of social justice as the key to the resolution of the violent conflicts that sustained the war there. The standard interpretation of Church history, which argues that it underwent a sudden conversion in the 1960s from ultra-right ally of the most reactionary social sectors of Latin America, to progressive social-justice advocate, is therefore mistaken, as we have seen. What stands out is the continuity of the Church’s social-justice strategy in its confrontation with communism, in a global sense from the late nineteenth century, and in the Latin American context, from the 1940s onward. The Church’s constant admonitions in favor of social justice not only had the effect of delaying the end of Cold War conflict, but spurred it on. Its longstanding dictum in favor of a right to resistance against illegitimate political authority was interpreted, in some circumstances, as a call to arms. Archbishop Rossell echoed St. Augustine’s admonition against an “unjust peace” when he affirmed in 1954 that “not a single code of Justice obligates one to seek Peace with a power that has made slaves of millions of human beings, and that desires to systematically erase the name of God and human Dignity from the earth.”50 Rossell was referring to communism. But in the 1960s, similar reasoning was applied by other bishops to capitalism, as they encouraged the faithful to consider the revolutionary reforms proposed by marxist parties.

48 John M. Kirk, Between God and the Party: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1989), Chs. 3-4.
50 Rossell y Arellano, Carta pastoral del Excelentísimo y Reverendísimo Señor Don Mariano Rossell Arellano Arzobispo de Guatemala Sobre los Avances del Comunismo en Guatemala, p. 9.
In either case, we see how a commitment to religious belief inspired a broad range of action in a field of intense violent and non-violent conflict across five decades. Beliefs do motivate action, and in the social conditions prevailing in Latin America, believing that the reconciliation of social conflict depends on justice led almost inevitably to action that intensified that conflict.  

For a sustained and convincing argument that moral beliefs explain human behavior better than its more popular competitors (such as rational choice theory, behaviorism, sociobiology, or neoclassical economics) see Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).


Documents of the Holy See


Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter "Quod Apostolici Muneris," 28 December 1878


Pius IX, Encyclical Letter "Divini redemptoris," 19 March 1937

Pius IX, Encyclical Letter "Qui Pluribus," 9 November 1846

Pius XI, Encyclical Letter "Divini redemptoris," 19 March 1937

Pius XII, Address, "Guiding Principles of the Lay Apostolate," 5 October 1957.

Consejo Episcopal de América Latina