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THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL STRATEGY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CHILE

Joleen Codner

Introduction

The Catholic Church in Chile is known for its progressive role during the military dictatorship from 1973 to 1980. Through the Vicaria de Solidaridad the Church functioned as a "protective umbrella," playing a key role in battling human rights violations, aiding the victims of the economic policies, and housing various organizations. As discontent with the military regime grew, the Church took an active role in moving toward democracy. After the election of Patricio Aylwin in 1989, the Church faced new challenges; political parties had reemerged, decreasing the need for a politically active Church. In Chile today, the Catholic Church is adapting to democracy while it searches for its new place in the Chilean social structure. What will this "new" role be? The answer to this question rests, in part, on the Church's historical definition of its role in Chilean society and, in part, on the Church elites' perceptions of current needs in Chile.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section provides a background of the Church's Social Doctrine and political strategies. The second section discusses the Social Doctrine and the Universal Church's political strategies in Chile prior to the military dictatorship, and the next section examines the Church's choice to oppose the military regime. The fourth section deals with the reemergence of the political parties and the Church's mediating role in the transition to democracy. The last section analyzes the Church's role during the return to democracy and the present.

The Universal Church and Catholic Social Doctrine

The Universal Catholic Church is a complex hierarchical institution, ranging from the pope and the Vatican, to the national Churches,
to the local parishes. The Universal Church’s core mission is religious: teaching, maintaining, and interpreting the central dogmas of Catholicism and regulating the moral code. In addition to its religious mission to save souls, however, the Church also interprets Catholic values in the world through its Social Doctrine by applying Catholic dogma to social and political issues. Unlike the core religious mission, the Catholic Church’s Social Doctrine has changed over time to respond to historical circumstances. Catholic Social Doctrine is interpreted by the pope while bishops and priests are responsible for teaching the values of the Social Doctrine.

Historically, the Church's Social Doctrine focused almost exclusively on administering to the poor. During the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), the Church opposed clergy participation in politics and focused on defending the Church’s authority as an institution. By the close of the 19th century, however, Pope Leo XIII began addressing worker injustices resulting from industrialization in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891). This document applies to life in the workplace and proposes a set of principles governing workers’ rights. The Church always considers it her task to call attention to the dignity and rights of those who work and to condemn situations in which that dignity and those rights are violated. (Royal, p. 26) *Rerum Novarum* recognizes that workers have a right to organize in Catholic associations and unions which could act as mediating structures between capital and labor. It also considers workers’ right to strike, calling on Catholic employers to provide a living and just wage. (Royal, p. 20) Pope Leo XIII condemned the misuse of men as instruments for another's gain. The rise of capitalism emphasizes materialist attitudes among men and reduces them to merely economic players. The abuses of capitalism are blamed for the miserable conditions of the working class.

Forty years later in 1931, Pope Pius XI wrote *Quadragesimo Anno* as a response to a world full of conflict, when social movements such as communism and socialism threatened the basic principles of the Church. The Pope called for a reconstruction of society through the reform of institutions such as Marxism and liberalism, and the reintegration of moral life by those who had strayed from their religious backgrounds. (Darring) Like *Rerum Novarum, Quadragesimo Anno* also addressed workers’ rights issues and asserted that Catholic social teachings should be practiced by both capital and labor.

These two encyclicals laid the foundation for the 20th century Catholic Social Doctrine and the Universal Church’s critique of classical liberalism, Marxism, and secularism. (Stewart-Gambino, The Church and Politics..., p. 4) Throughout the 20th century, the Church has opposed liberalism because of its excessive emphasis on individualism and its association with anticlericalism. The Church also opposed Marxism because of its doctrine of violent conflict between the classes. Finally, Catholic Social Doctrine warned of the dangers of secularism, which relegates religious belief to the merely “personal” realm of an individual’s life.

Even though Catholic Social Doctrine is universal, national Churches and even individual bishops determine how to best tailor the Social Doctrine to the temporal realities in each country or in each diocese. The mandate to oppose secularism or Marxism in many countries led national Church hierarchies to work in alliance with Catholic political parties, which were usually conservative. The pattern of working in close alliance with conservative, pro-clerical parties was particularly pronounced in Latin America, including Chile. However, with the publication of *Quadragesimo Anno*, the Universal Church changed strategies, urging national Churches to rise “above politics” in order to disassociate the Church from the (often falling) political fortunes of any particular party.

**Catholic Social Doctrine in Chile Prior to the Pinochet Regime**

In a relatively short period of time, Chile experimented with a wide range of approaches to solve some of its chronic economic and political problems. The predominantly Catholic cultural heritage of the country, coupled with pastoral innovations in the Church, has made Catholicism an important factor in shaping some of these experiments. (Smith, The Church and Politics..., p. 11)

In 1925 under President Arturo Alessandri, a new constitution was drafted that officially sep-
arated the Church and state. Although some Chilean clergy continued to identify strongly with the conservative party, others (most notably Archbishop of Santiago Crescente Errazuriz) strictly forbade clergy from participating in politics or instructing Catholics to vote for the conservative party. Although the Chilean Catholic Church had outwardly declared that it was nonpartisan, this in no way meant that it was nonpolitical. With no specific political party association, it nevertheless looked out for its interests. For example, the Catholic Church had always opposed divorce and abortion and counted on allies within the political parties to vote according to Church views.

In order to “rise above politics” yet maintain political influence, the Church adopted a strategy called Catholic Action (1931) that was encouraged by the Vatican. The purpose was to disseminate religious principles through catechism training, the strengthening of Catholic family morality primarily through young women’s groups, and the formation of an awareness of Catholic civic duties. (Stewart-Gambino, The Church and Politics..., p. 33) More than most other Latin American Church hierarchies, Chile followed this model. Catholic Action was designed for national Churches to devise programs to develop leadership in the workplaces, political parties, and social organizations. Through these types of organizations, the Church hoped to influence the full range of social and political institutions rather than relying solely on the Conservative Party, as had been done previously. The Church also maintained an extensive range of nationally funded Catholic schools through which it instilled Catholic values in the next generation.

By the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Universal Catholic Church under Pope John Paul XXIII’s leadership worried that Catholicism had simply become irrelevant in the modern world. Vatican II led to reforms in the Universal Church, such as translating church ceremonies from Latin to the vernacular and modernizing the delivery of the sacraments. In Chile, Vatican II spawned several very progressive movements, such as the worker-priest movement, the rapid proliferation of socially progressive grass-roots-based Christian communities (CEBs), and an open sympathy among many of the members of the hierarchy for the centrist Christian Democratic Party. (Stewart-Gambino, “Retreat to the Sacristy...,” p. 149) By the end of the 1960s, many clerics had moved farther left with some in the Church supporting the socialist presidential candidate, Salvador Allende, who won the presidential election in 1970.

The Catholic Church during the Pinochet Regime

By 1973, the Chilean political system was deeply polarized and violent civil unrest was rampant. The economic policies of the Allende government caused the economic power of the business class to weaken while leaving their political power intact so that they could mobilize through their business associations and right-wing political parties. (Martinez, p. 45) As a result of the deep economic crisis, riots occurred daily in the streets, schools, and factories. The Catholic bishops under the leadership of Archbishop Silva Henriquez called for the military to step in to restore order. The Church, however, did not anticipate the level of violence of the coup that began on September 11, 1973, under General Pinochet. When the coup began, military tanks patrolled the streets, the presidential building was bombed, and a new period in Chilean history began.

After the coup, the military dictatorship dissolved the congress. The military aimed to depoliticize the country by ridding Chile of leftist activists and banning political parties, trade unions, and nearly every other form of civil organization. Along with this, the military installed a new economic system using the “Chicago Boys” to shape the economic model.

Thousands of people suspected of being enemies of the military “disappeared,” while the military used systematic human rights violations, from torture to murder, to maintain social control. The only organization safe from overt military repression during this time was the Catholic Church. Although initially the hierarchy was publicly silent about the military’s violence, preferring to work behind the scenes to save lives, by 1975 the Church began to take an active role. Church leaders began criticizing the dictatorship for its human rights
abuses and, later, its economic strategy; however, most bishops were careful to avoid direct confrontations with the military.

Responding to the many outcries against human rights violations by the military, the Church hierarchy published *Evangelio y Paz* (*Gospel and Peace*) in 1975. This encyclical letter identified some of the most basic human rights that must be respected as a precondition for peace in any society, such as the right to life and bodily integrity. ("Evangelio y Paz," p. 465) In this document, however, the bishops were careful to express their appreciation to the military for taking over and combating the rise of Marxism.

During this time, the Church preferred to deal with the military's human rights violations through private meetings with military leaders, fearing that public confrontations would threaten its working position with the government. *Evangelio y Paz* accepted the military's legitimacy, although the encyclical letter tried to hint that human rights violations were evident. This had no effect on the military's policies.

In 1977, Chilean bishops published *Nuestra Convivencia Nacional* (*Our Life as a Nation*), which stepped up the Church's criticism of the military. In this letter, the bishops inquired into the whereabouts of the "disappeared" people, noted the military's human rights violations, and criticized the economic policies. This pastoral letter clearly showed a change in attitude since *Evangelio y Paz*. The bishops had become bold and, from this time on, openly voiced their dissatisfaction with the regime.

Although the bishops were reluctant to publicly criticize the military in 1973, that year Archbishop Silva Henriquez helped found the ecumenical Committee of Cooperation for Peace (COPACHI) in order to aid those persecuted by the military. COPACHI later extended help to the poor hurt by the regime's economic policies. In the countryside it helped set up cooperatives for small farmers, and in Santiago it supported health clinics in working-class neighborhoods where more than 75,000 patients were treated during the first two years of military rule. (Smith, *The Church and Politics*..., p. 313) On the other hand, COPACHI had only about 300 members and thus was limited in the aid it could provide. In spite of its limitations, by 1974 the government began to publicly criticize COPACHI, and many of its members were arrested.

Due to great pressure from the government, Archbishop Silva Henriquez dissolved COPACHI in 1975 and created in its place the Vicaria de Solidaridad. The Vicaria had the same goals as COPACHI, although there were some organizational differences; for one thing, the Vicaria was founded in the Catholic Church. During the dictatorship, the Vicaria became a safe haven; organizations such as the Association of the Families of the Disappeared, workers' unions, and peasant organizations were able to meet in the Vicaria. The Vicaria also served as the largest legal service for victims and their families of political imprisonment, arrest, and torture during the regime. Furthermore, the Vicaria ran programs aiding those convicted and accused, fought for the protection of personal freedoms, and provided support for those exiled from the country. Documented information about the abuses of the military regime, especially the human rights violations, were compiled, analyzed, and investigated through the Vicaria.

The military's economic policies created widespread economic hardship. While hunger and unemployment increased, government spending, particularly in the social welfare programs, was slashed. At diocesan levels, many smaller Church community organizations, non-government organizations (NGOs), and popular economic organizations (PEOs) were formed to provide support for the middle and lower classes. In one 1986 study of over 1,200 popular economic organizations in the Santiago metropolitan area, approximately 84 percent of the organizations that did not have meeting locations met in sites provided by the Catholic Church. (Stewart-Gambino, "Retreat to the Sacristy...", p. 147)

As the Church actively voiced criticism of the political and economic policies, Church ties with the lower and working classes became stronger. At the same time, the Church's connections with the upper class and right wing parties became strained. Many wealthy Chileans who thought that the Church's social policies were too closely linked to the lower classes and to the political left felt excluded.
Some upper class Chileans and right wing party members publicly criticized the Church for its social and political activities.

The Reemergence of Political Parties

Spurred by faith in the self-regulation of the market, the military government removed all restrictions on foreign borrowing by banks at the end of 1979 and allowed private individuals or companies to receive loans in foreign currency as well. (Martinez, p. 58) During this time, foreign debt increased greatly, and many "paper companies" were formed. The Chilean economic boom, which began in 1975 when the military regime applied free market principles to the economy, came to a quick end in 1982, leading to skyrocketing unemployment and an escalation of opposition to the military. Then on May 11, 1983, the Confederation of Copper Workers called for a national protest against the regime and its economic policies. The unexpected success of the protest led to planned monthly demonstrations with thousands taking to the streets to demand a return to democracy and Pinochet's resignation. In response to the people's protests, the regime answered by arresting and torturing many people.

Once the demonstrations began, political parties became revitalized by the possibility of governmental changes. During the military regime, the political parties had been maintained through Church organizations; but when they began to reemerge, the Church was able to step back from the political light. With less attention focused on politics during the early 1980s, the Chilean Catholic Church underwent some internal changes. Under pressures from the hierarchy, the Church decided to concentrate less on its activist position in social and political issues and more on the religious mission of the Church; but it continued many of its policies against human rights violations and aided those suffering from the economic policies.

A significant internal change occurred in 1983, when Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez retired and was replaced by Archbishop Juan Francisco Fresno as the new archbishop of Santiago. The two religious leaders had differing opinions on the proper role of the Church. Archbishop Fresno emphasized the spiritual mission, believing that the Church should not be associated with political issues. Fresno also argued that the hierarchy's apparent endorsement of the opposition and its political goals in the late 1970s and early 1980s reinforced the divisions in Chilean society, alienated many believers from the saving grace of the Church, and contributed to the loss of the Church's moral authority. (Stewart-Gambino, "Redefining the Changes...," p. 28) Although Fresno wanted to pull the Church out of politics, the bishops could not ignore the poor and the regime's constant violation of human rights. Moreover, Pinochet authorized attacks on the Church itself. For example, in March 1983 Pinochet expelled three Irish priests from the country for participating in hunger marches and activities involving the defense of human rights. According to a declaration issued in July 1983 by priests working in eastern Santiago, beatings and arrests of chapel custodians were part of a continuing "campaign of harassment against the Catholic Church." (Kinzer, p. 3)

In an attempt to mediate between the military and the growing strength of the protesters, Fresno initiated meetings between government officials and opposition leaders. Unfortunately, these meetings were unsuccessful, for neither side was willing to compromise. The net results of these failed talks were greater polarization and distrust between opposition and alliances, greater unease on the right and hence a greater tendency to continue support for Pinochet, and embarrassment on the part of the Church. (Stewart-Gambino, "Redefining the Changes...," p. 30) Church-state relations quickly deteriorated. Criticisms of the Church escalated after this, with not only priests but also Church buildings coming under attack. Newspapers were not allowed to publish anything that the Catholic Church had to say about the state-of-siege measures that were being enforced.

In an attempt to quiet the criticisms of the Church, Archbishop Fresno launched the National Accord for the Transition to Full Democracy in 1985. The National Accord was created to encourage dialogue between political parties. The Accord arose out of a number of meetings in which representatives from various parties discussed the peaceful transition to a
The Church’s Role during the Return to Democracy

After sixteen years of military rule, the Chilean military was not ready for a sharp transition to a completely democratic government. The main obstacle to democracy was the 1980 constitution, which did not allow full democratization to occur. In particular, the 1980 constitution included the following provisions: (1) that Pinochet remain head of the Army until 1998, (2) that Pinochet stay as a senator for life, (3) that Pinochet be given the power to designate nine senators, (4) that 1/10 of the revenues from copper sales went to the armed forces, (5) that no changes be made to the economic policies instated by the military government, and (6) that a blanket amnesty be given to the military for human rights violations that occurred before 1979.

The stipulations of the 1980 constitution have held Chile back from accomplishing a complete transition to democracy. An example of the limitations of the 1980 constitution that Pinochet and his advisors wrote (to guarantee the military a role in government and a disproportionate presence of the right wing parties in the legislature) can be seen in the senate, where many of the current senators held positions during the military regime. Pinochet did exercise his power to assign nine of the forty-seven senators, which ensured pro-military support for Pinochet. Even today, military leaders refuse to give up their governmental power.

After Alywin became president, very little changed in the country’s economic strategy. Chile continued to focus on free trade and export-oriented growth, while inequality of income increased and the living conditions of the poor stayed the same or even worsened. In 1996, the wealthiest 20 percent of Chilean households received over one-half of total income while the bottom three quintiles had less than 25 percent of the total. (Duquette, p. 313) These figures demonstrate how the growing inequality of income greatly contributes to the problem of the lagging living standards of the poor.

Although the country has not fully completed the transition to democracy during the 1990s, the Church has completely retreated from its previous politically active role. Resuming its position above politics, the Church no longer takes a political position, and Church leaders interact with a range of political leaders. Many clergy members are willing to settle with the current state of the government, rather than returning to the previous state of military control.

The Church’s recession from the political scene was partially due to Cardinal Fresno’s
replacement by Bishop Carlos Oviedo (1989), a church conservative. Oviedo preached that the Church welcomes all people, independent of their political associations. Since Oviedo became the archbishop during the time of democratization after the military regime, he was faced with determining the Chilean Catholic Church’s position in this new society. Following Pope John Paul II’s message for a successful transition to democracy, Archbishop Oviedo stressed that reconciliation and forgiveness were vital.

Consistent with its new position, the Church’s “protective umbrella,” the Vicaria de Solidaridad, closed. Monsignor Sergio Valech, the Vicaria’s last head, commented on the closing by saying that “the Church believes it is now the duty of civilian society to safeguard the basic principles of human rights it once lost.” (Crawford, p. 5) The closing of the Vicaria abolished the central organizational structure that had coordinated support for an annual average of 1,600 organizations during the dictatorship in which an estimated 60,000 people participated per year. (Stewart-Gambino, “Retreat to the Sacristy…,” p. 142)

Even though the Vicaria closed, prominent national organizations such as the Association of the Families of the Disappeared continued to function. Throughout the 1990s, many mothers and wives came forward through the Association, demanding to know the truth about what happened to their loved ones and insisting that the killers be brought to trial. The Church had gathered information through the Vicaria about the human rights violations which was later submitted to the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation. The Commission had been appointed to clarify “the truth about the gravest violations of human rights ... and to contribute to the reconciliation of all Chileans.” (Ross, p. 10) The Commission, created in 1991, presented a six-volume report to President Alywin about the violations. In it the Commission identified more than 3,500 cases of murder or disappearances at the hands of the military since 1973 and detailed the circumstances surrounding their cases. (Ross, p. 10)

The government’s policy of truth and reconciliation was meant to provide justice to the families of victims by simply clarifying the situation of the detained and disappeared. In the matter of reparations, the Commission suggested symbolic reparations such as the construction of a public monument in remembrance of the victims and a symbol of national reconciliation. The Commission on Truth and Reconciliation took a step toward justice by providing the truth, but not punishment for the perpetrators of crimes.

Following the release of the report of the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, the government called on the families of victims to find forgiveness for the acts committed. A spokesman for the Alywin government said that once the report became public, the government would consider its duty accomplished. (Ross, p. 10) Many Chileans, including some bishops, were enraged by this, however, and continued to demand justice through criminal proceedings for the treacherous acts that had been committed. The dismissal of military officers was not even remotely possible, however, because of the 1980 constitution, which granted a blanket amnesty to the military for any human rights violations that occurred before 1979.

As Archbishop Oviedo continued to define the Church’s position within Chile’s new democracy, the Church began to reinforce its influence as the country’s moral authority. While the Church’s political strategy is rather clear, its civil role is still being debated. With its focus moving away from what happened during the Pinochet regime, many Church organizations, including human rights organizations that developed during the dictatorship, have disappeared. Instead, the Chilean Catholic Church is now turning its attention to issues of personal morality and education. For example, whereas fraudulent marriage annulments are prevalent and divorce is illegal, the government frequently proposes bills to legalize divorce and then eventually rejects them. While the polls show that 70 percent of Chileans support the bills to legalize divorce, there are still many politicians with ties to the Catholic Church who continue to oppose changing the civil marriage code. (Faiola, p. A12) Other issues, ranging from abortion and sex education to television, are highly controlled and influenced by the Church. For example, due to pressures from the Church, in 1997 two television channels
refused to transmit the health ministry's educational publicity against AIDS. ("Chile. Public Health...," p. 42)

Because of inadequate state investment in education, the Chilean government is highly dependent on the Catholic schools. Just over one half of Chile's three million school children attend privately-owned schools. ("Chile. Public Health...," p. 42) In many of the wealthy neighborhoods, Catholic schools are highly elitist and only accept students from "properly constituted" families. Through this selective process, the Catholic Church continues to educate future leaders with Catholic values.

Among Church progressives, the proper role of the Church in civil society is not easily defined. Some progressives believe that the Church has an institutional responsibility to strengthen civil society and emphasize community involvement through grassroots organizations as a means of helping the poor and maintaining an influence in civil society. They believe that the Church cannot simply recede from society and concentrate solely on its religious mission, but that it must be available to aid in the country's complete transition to democracy without interfering in the state's activities. As Pope John Paul II said in a homily on June 2, 1997: "As long as there is injustice in the world, no matter how small, we must return to [social questions]. Otherwise the Church would not be faithful to the mission entrusted to her by Christ — the mission of justice." (Nickoloff, p. 24)

The Future of the Chilean Catholic Church

Although Chile's transition to democracy began in 1990, the country is still in a transitional state. While the Frei government elected in 1995 has proposed many judicial reforms, the 1980 constitution still stands as an obstacle to complete democracy. Today in its transitional state, Chile is in the process of developing a relationship between the democratic state and its civil institutions. Successful democratic consolidation, therefore, involves actors in civil society that play a role in linking people to democratic institutions and procedures. (Stewart-Gambino, "Retreat to the Sacristy...," p. 139)

Even if many people have moved beyond the incidents that occurred during the dictatorship, certain events cause these memories to keep resurfacing. Graves are continually being discovered with bodies of "disappeared" people. Debates over reconciliation, justice, and impunity have been prompted by the detainment of Pinochet in England in October 1998. Most recently, the Spaniards want to prosecute Pinochet for human rights violations against Spaniards who lived in Chile in the 1970s. Reminders from the past keep many Chileans from accepting what happened in the past.

In the years ahead, the Church will be faced with new challenges arising from Chile's return to democracy. Between continuing issues of education, changing personal morality, and the increasing popularity of Protestantism, the Church may struggle to maintain its tight influence in civil society. The proper role of the Church will most likely result in a mixed model. In this model the Church will probably reassert its role as a moral guide to civil society from a self-imposed position outside or "above" politics. At the same time the Church will also probably maintain a strong influence in civil society through grassroots organizations and linkages that are more atomized and dependent on individual priests and bishops. (Stewart-Gambino, "Retreat to the Sacristy...," p. 152)
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