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Una Iglesia Desaparecida:

The End of an Era for the Chilean Catholic Church

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Abstract: This article aims to investigate the changing political alignment of the Chilean Catholic Church following the fall of the dictatorship in the early 1990's. The author brings together a primary source collection of new articles, photographs, and interviews, as well as a secondary source collection of sociological surveys and historiography, to interrogate the process and outcome of this political transition. The article maintains that desires for hierarchical control and a rejection of past, progressive theology motivated Church leaders to transition the Church away from community based leadership, to clerical control.

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of September 19th, 1973, Father Joan Alsina arrived at San Juan de Dios Hospital in San Felipe to begin his usual work. Augusto Pinochet's coup, which would change the course of Chile forever, had occurred only eight days before, and many of his friends had advised him to steer clear of the hospital and go into hiding. He was well known as an advocate for the poor and working classes, and was a leader of the hospital workers' union; all of these things put him in a precarious position following the right wing coup. Chile was a devoutly Catholic country, but he was only a priest, and a Spanish one at that; he knew full well his clerical status would not save him. Leftist priests had already started going missing, especially those who had been aligned with Allende's presidency. The night before, sensing the impending doom of his likely arrest, he wrote a letter as a last testament, then awoke in the morning and set off for the hospital. The arrival of the soldiers was both unsurprising and incredibly efficient. Despite his compliance, they beat him on the floor of the hospital, and dragged him to a van waiting outside. The rest of the day transpired in a haze of pain and confusion, but he was certainly awake and coherent when he was dragged from the van again at 10 P.M. The young

soldier who grabbed him brought him to the edge of Bulnes Bridge on the Mapocho River and moved to place a blindfold on him. The priest turned away. “Please,” he said. “Don’t put the bandage on me, kill me from the front. I want to see you so that I can forgive you.”¹ The soldier complied, and tossed the cloth aside. He brought his submachine gun up to the chest of the priest, who crossed himself and turned his eyes towards the sky. “Father, forgive them...” he began to pray. The soldier sprayed him with a round of bullets, and Joan Alsina’s body fell into the Mapocho River. He was thirty-one years old.²

Joan Alsina’s death made him an icon of the Church’s compassion and devotion to the alleviation of poverty and fight for human rights in Chile. He became a martyr for both clergy and laity who put their lives on the line in the fight for dignity and justice against the regime of Augusto Pinochet. But this heroic Church, devoted to creating sanctuary for its communities and resisting violent repression, is now a mere memory in Chile. Today, Chile has seen a decrease in both church attendance and religious membership, with next to no community religious organizing. While people may feel personally attached to the Catholic faith, the physical practice itself has largely disappeared from the Chilean mainstream, and is now relegated to wealthier classes who observe Opus Dei masses of the conservative variety.³⁴

¹ “Joan Alsina Hurtos,” Joan Alsina Hurtos. Memoria Viva, April 29, 2014. https://www.memoriaviva.com/Ejecutados/Ejecutados_A/joan_alsina_hurtos.htm. TRANSLATED

² Ibid.

³ Antonio Bentue, Interview by September Sky Porras. Personal Interview. Universidad Catolica en San Joaquin, Santiago de Chile, July 20, 2019.

⁴ James Martin, “Opus Dei In the United States.” America- The National Catholic Weekly. America Press, February 25, 1995. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090116173841/http://www.americamagazine.org/content/articles/martin-opusdei.cfm>



Photo taken in the home of Father Mariano Puga, a leftist priest in the neighborhood of Villa Francia in Santiago. Alsina, once a good friend, remains alive in the memories of those his life impacted.

How did a Church once entrenched in poor communities and committed to human rights become a staple of conservative culture and hierarchical will? This work looks at primary source materials and pre-existing scholarship to argue that the changing political alignment of the Chilean Catholic Church in the post-dictatorship era was a calculated move on part of Church leaders who felt threatened by the social work and legacy of liberation theology which dominated the Church during the regime. The histories of the Second Vatican Council and liberation theology play heavily into this analysis, as they represent a fleeting era of community based religious participation that was later condemned by the inauguration of new conservative church leadership. A primary example of the effects of this new leadership in Chile was the dissolution of the Vicaria de Solidaridad, a Catholic organization founded to serve the community in Santiago and catalogue the human rights violations of the regime. After examining the historical background of progressive Catholic work in Chile under the dictatorship, the following section of this article will look more closely at the early 1990s to argue the reality and logistics of this change, as well as acknowledge the consequences present in Chile today. The aim of this piece is to make clear the intent with which the Catholic Church turned away from

the progressive, community-based organizing in exchange for what they perceived would be a stronger hold on political and social power. The unfortunate consequences of these actions in Chile has been a disappearing Church with weak claims to authority and leadership.

Considering the political undertones of this discussion, it is important to note that this transition of political and social alliances was also occurring at the end of the Cold War Era. As the Soviet Union's hold on the international scene shattered, so too did many of the dictatorships and U.S. backed governments in both Latin America and the Middle East. The long history of Catholic liberation theology as an active resistance to capitalism and poverty fell to the side as the Catholic Church did its best to reframe the narrative of this new, democratic age. In Chile, the social and political work of the Vicaria de Solidaridad was a testament to the power of Catholic progressive movements in their resistance to authoritarian regimes. Though not a public proponent of Marxism or liberation theology, the Vicaria nevertheless acted as a center of resistance and sanctuary, and in that resistance was rooted the familiar themes of justice, equality, an alleviation of poverty, and a consolidation of community.⁵ With the dissolution of the Vicaria and the replacement of leaders within the Chilean Catholic Church, this history of human rights advocacy and community organizing was traded in for hierarchy based leadership concerned more with social morals than political ones. As the Church traded in community for control, they experienced a decrease in community organizing, church attendance, and even religious membership. Today, the experience of the Catholic Church in Chile, and specifically Santiago, is completely divorced from its history as a committed fighter for community leadership and solidarity; a reality obvious to both the clergy and those who attend their masses.

⁵ "La Vicaría De La Solidaridad (1973-1992) - Memoria Chilena." Memoria Chilena: Portal. Accessed November 30, 2019. <http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3547.html>.

Thus, the reaction of the Church to the changing political landscape in the early 1990s held repercussions that would affect its leaders and members throughout the next three decades, and ultimately lead to a Church eroded by its own anxious attempt to retain power.

Part I — THE THREAT

In order to understand the consequences of the Church's decision, we must first understand the background for the decision itself. Scholars are in agreement around the fact of the Church's changing political alignment in the post-dictatorship years, but the reasoning for the change has been the subject of interpretation. Liesl Haas, a California State professor on Latin American politics and gender, authored a chapter entitled "The Catholic Church in Chile: New Political Alliances" in the collection *Latin American Religion in Motion*. In this chapter she identifies the end of the dictatorship as a time of crisis for the Catholic Church, and acknowledges the subsequent switch from progressive human rights advocacy to conservative preoccupation with social morals. Since the Catholic Church has historically held socially conservative views around abortion, marriage, and so on, the post-dictatorship era switched their concern from human rights to keeping hold of the morality of their diocese.⁶ As a result, many of the homilies and teachings turned from encouraging community solidarity to upholding many right-wing political perspectives. According to Haas, the Church didn't necessarily lose those social views when the coup occurred in 1973, they just became a second priority to the defense of human rights. While much of Haas' interpretation follows through with historical analysis, her implication that the foundation of the Church remained unchanged fails to acknowledge the historical context of liberation theology, as well as the dissolution of the Vicaria de Solidaridad.

⁶ Liesl Haas, "The Catholic Church in Chile: New Political Alliances," in *Latin American Religion in Motion: Tracking Innovation, Unexpected Change, and Complexity*. Florence: Routledge, 2004, pp. 45.

To view the changing political alignment of the Church as “ironic” in light of its progressive history, and to see these changes as secondary factors to a preoccupation with social morals, is to ultimately overlook the legacy of the Catholic Church’s engagement and interest in maintaining political power.⁷ There was indeed a concern over a newly realized social liberation, and this no doubt contributed to the Church’s turnover, but it was a *revival*. Pope John Paul II’s papacy was famous for its desire to reestablish Church power in hierarchy, and Chile’s Church seized the end of the dictatorship as a time to fall in line with the Pope’s new agenda.⁸ The end of dictatorship coincided with the end of the Cold War, and the Catholic Church was doing its best to move away from this era of progressive, and even Marxist, religious rhetoric.

For the Church, the middle of the twentieth century was the most change it had seen since the Renaissance. Pope Leo XIII’s advocacy for reforms inaugurated the century, and following this were worker priests coming out of both World Wars, intent on alleviating the suffering that had been caused by such destructive violence.⁹ It became evident that a new era of modernity had been born, and Pope John XXII decided it was time for an international conference to address the Church’s approach. Thus, in 1962 the Second Vatican Council commenced which a theme of bringing the Catholic Church into the modern age, while also respecting the traditions of those who had come before. Decisions made at Vatican II included the non-requirement of Latin mass, the encouragement of clerical community relations, the amelioration of relations

⁷ Ibid., pp. 51.

⁸ James Martin, “Opus Dei In the United States.” *America- The National Catholic Weekly*. America Press, February 25, 1995. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090116173841/http://www.americamagazine.org/content/articles/martin-opusdei.cfm>.

⁹ José Comblin, *Called for Freedom: The Changing Context of Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998, pp. 3, 4.

with other religions, and the support for individuals Catholics to engage with Scripture.¹⁰ A profound transition for a church so steeped in hierarchical tradition, but it was not to last for long. The develop of conflict in Latin America, and the inauguration of Pope John Paul II in 1978, would create friction against these ideals.¹¹

Though the conference in no way advocated for the increasingly popular Marxist concern for the poor, a following conference in Medellin certainly addressed the growing leftist sentiment. The Medellin conference was a collection of Latin American bishops and clergy who, after the progressive decisions made at Vatican II, wished to move forward with a “preferential option for the poor,” which would put power in the hands of Catholic parishioners.¹² It was partly these changes that inspired the work of Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest who, as a witness to Latin America’s intense struggle with poverty, wrote and published works on what he called the “liberation of theology.”¹³ This framework entails understanding the reality of poverty, as well as acknowledging how systems that have constructed such suffering are the embodiment of sin. The idea of a Catholic liberation theology based around a “preferential option for the poor” influenced a movement of clergy across Latin America to bring social and community

¹⁰ Vincenzo Carbone, “Vatican Council II: Light for the Church and for the Modern World.” Jubilaum- Vatican. Accessed November 30, 2019. http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01051997_p-21_en.html.

¹¹ Antonio Bentue, Interview by September Sky Porras. Personal Interview. Universidad Catolica en San Joaquin, Santiago de Chile, July 20, 2019.

¹² “Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM),” Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture. *Encyclopedia.com*. (December 18, 2019). <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/conference-latin-american-bishops-celam>.

¹³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, and James B. Nickoloff. *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.

organizing into their churches and out to the street. In El Salvador, Bishop Oscar Romero used radio to preach for an end to violence and dissonance. In Brazil, Bishop Helder Camara defended communists from the dictatorship and was blacklisted. In Argentina, various priests attempted to save parishioners from being detained in torture facilities, only to be arrested and disappeared themselves.

The impact of both Vatican II and liberation theology was felt heavily across the globe, but nowhere more than Latin America where the reality of violent and repressive governments pushed many clergy into action. In Chile, various priests and even bishops made it their duty to



A mural of liberation theology icons in a small Villa Francia church. Villa Francia remains today one of the few active, liberation theology based churches. The mural includes Joan Alsina and Oscar Romero, as well as local heroes Mariano Puga and Enrique Alvaer.

put their communities first, especially following the coup. However, perhaps the most successful and well-known examples of a progressive Church intent on the wellbeing of its citizens was the Vicaria de Solidaridad.

On New Year's Eve, 1975, Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez of Santiago ceded to the demands of Pinochet and formally dissolved the Comité de Cooperación para la Paz

(COPACHI), an ecumenical organization devoted to the protection of human rights.¹⁴ On New Year's Day, 1976, the Cardinal formally established the Vicaria de Solidaridad, a solely Catholic organization devoted to the protection of human rights.¹⁵ In one sly move, Silva managed to address Pinochet's accusation that Marxists were attempting to infiltrate COPACHI, while also ensuring the continuation of human rights work on the part of the Church. The Vicaria then proceeded to successfully provide sanctuary, legal defense, documentation, and aid to those experiencing human rights abuses and their families. They maintained this by having a structure which split work into various departments, such as a legal department to deal with detentions, a department for the publishing of their magazine, a department of zones which provided aid to the poor, and even an excess support department which was focused on documentation. At the top sat the vicar, and then his Executive Secretary who governed the departments all the way down to local volunteers.¹⁶ In many ways, the Vicaria went farther than the COPACHI was ever able to, and garnered international attention by making public the extensive human rights violations of the Pinochet regime. This international attention was no doubt a contributor to his eventual downfall—specifically in reference to junta members' reluctance to support a second coup after the 1988 referendum. It is for all these reasons the Vicaria itself can be considered an almost radical form of resistance to the regime. Here, the term radical should be understood as a way to stress the dangerous and alternative nature of the Vicaria, and to acknowledge its progressive tendencies. Although Cardinal Silva denied affiliation with liberation theology, and even received critique by leftist clergy and laity for his more moderate nature, the Vicaria itself was

¹⁴ "La Vicaría De La Solidaridad (1973-1992) - Memoria Chilena." Memoria Chilena: Portal. Accessed November 30, 2019. <http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3547.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Vicaría de la Solidaridad, *Vicaría de la Solidaridad : historia de su trabajo social*. Memoria Chilena, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago de Chile, 1991. Accessed on September 17, 2019. <http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-9123.html>.

the most outstanding and successful forms of resistance to the military dictatorship.¹⁷ In addition, like other progressive Catholic movements, the Vicaria functioned as an institution run by those partial to leftist views, while also *remaining* a part of an institution with conservative traditions, and operating *during* violent repression. Thus, when we observe the Vicaria as a “radical” player, it is in reference to its service and position under the regime, and not necessarily its political motivations.

The history and impact of the Vicaria figures prominently in this analysis as its closure presents a strong argument that, after the dictatorship, the Church took specific steps to close community level organizing and anything that might promote a more progressive agenda. Although the official structure and services of the Vicaria had no political affiliation, nor did they formally give aid to communist or militant resistance groups, obviously the existence and implication of such an alignment was perceived as a threat by the Church to the maintenance of social and political control. Its dissolution can be seen as a direct example of a revival of conservatism, and a marking of the end of an era of religious organizing and attendance in Chile. Church leaders made the decision to dissolve the Vicaria, knowingly or not, at the expense of a vibrant and passionate Catholic community in Santiago. However, to fully understand the threat the Vicaria posed to the hierarchical structure of the Church in this new democratic era, it is important to address certain actions of the Vicaria itself.

Part of understanding the Vicaria as being of a “radical” nature has to do with its resistance to authority. Although it operated as a legal organization under the regime, it nevertheless was its direct opponent, occupying a liminal and unique space in the time of the

¹⁷ Antonio Bentue, Interview by September Sky Porras. Personal Interview. Universidad Catolica en San Joaquin, Santiago de Chile, July 20, 2019.

dictatorship. Pinochet could not publicly disavow the Vicaria without creating an enemy of the Church itself, as Cardinal Silva served as its defender. Forced into a position of reluctant diplomacy in order to retain his power, Pinochet allowed the existence of the Vicaria, but not without an assurance of increased surveillance and pressure by the DINA.¹⁸ The Vicaria was not, however, without agency and intelligence of its own.

In her book *The Inferno*, Luz Arce recounts her transition from a Socialist Party member under the government of Salvador Allende to being tortured and then later working for the DINA in an effort to protect her family. As she began to work more deeply within the DINA, her fear of the Vicaria grew. Her position as a member of an organization responsible for many human rights abuses put her in a precarious position with the Vicaria, as she risked being tried for human rights violations herself. Documents stolen by the DINA informed her of the legal intricacies of the Vicaria's accountability system, and while she found herself in respectful awe of their work, she also recognized that they presented a threat to her position within the DINA and thus the protection of her family.¹⁹ She also expresses surprise at the links to liberation theology, saying, "I had never heard of this church before. It was very different from the one I knew as a child, which had instilled such fear in me as a young girl that I fled from it as an adolescent."²⁰ This new church was not only one of the community, but also one which exercised meticulous record keeping in relation to military and DINA actions surrounding detentions and human rights. It was the Vicaria who held accountable those guilty of torture and other war

¹⁸ The DINA refers to the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional, a secret police unit formed by Pinochet originally as an arm of the military, though it was later established as a separate unit. The DINA was largely responsible for the carrying out of "disappearing" citizens, as well as gaining intelligence through surveillance and torture in hidden centers.

¹⁹ Luz Arce, *The Inferno: A Story of Terror and survival in Chile*, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004, pp. 237.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 237.

crimes, and did so in such an efficient manner that those within the regime, as exemplified in Arce's story, viewed them with apprehension and disdain.



Protests outside of the Vicaria de Solidaridad. Often when civilians attempted to enter the Vicaria, they would be met with hostile military police who would interrogate them, beat them, or even hose them down with fire hoses. Circa 1980.



A man shows the marks and abrasions he received from an encounter with the military police, 1983.

In another section of Arce's book, she mentions intimidation tactics taken on by the DINA in order to threaten the Vicaria, including an attempted assassination of leftist Bishop Enrique Alvaer, and the detainment of a Vicaria lawyer.²¹ The popular support of the Vicaria also encouraged ecclesiastical based communities, which were small groups of Catholics coming together to engage with politics and scripture on their own. These groups were often even more left than the Vicaria, and empowered many to stand against the regime.²² Under Pinochet, Santiago became alive with explicit actions of resistance from the Church itself, and the many it inspired. However, as the dictatorship waned, so too did the leftist rhetoric of this resilient Church.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 261.

²² Olivia Migliori, "Prayers of Peace and Protest: The Relationship between the Catholic Church and Chile's Socialist and Military Governments (1970-1990)" (2017). Dickinson College Honors Theses. Paper 287.

Part II — THE TRANSITION

On October 5, 1988 a national referendum was held in Chile to decide if the ruling military regime of Augusto Pinochet would be extended yet another eight years. Young and old alike filled the street distributing pamphlets with voting directions and information; flyers papers all over Santiago read “NO,” a reference to the vote against Pinochet. Not only did those publicizing the referendum have to work against a confusing ballot where a negative answer meant a positive outcome, but they also had to convince citizens that they wouldn’t be subject to terrorism and intimidation by the government when they showed up at the polls. Yet, despite the uphill battle, the NO campaign won with a 53% vote.²³ Not quite ready to lose the long game, Pinochet met with other members of the junta to discuss the action they might take in response to the vote. According to reports, it was in this meeting on the evening of the plebiscite that he suggested a violent overthrow of the vote and a reinstatement of the coup.²⁴ However, with growing pressure from international powers due to the many human rights violations published by the Vicaria de Solidaridad, as well as this standing promise of a fair election, members of the junta turned against Pinochet’s plan to violently retain power. The referendum had been allowed, and thus it had to be followed through. Over the course of the next year, Augusto Pinochet and his military dictatorship would be phased out of the Chilean government. For the first time in fifteen years, the Chilean people would be allowed to elect their leader. For many, this was the beginning of an era free of repression, a restoration of agency and community in the absence of terror. For the Chilean Catholic Church, however, this was a moment of crisis. Political

²³ Eugene Robinson, “Chile’s Pinochet Beaten in Plebiscite on Rule,” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, October 6, 1988.

²⁴ United States Department of Defense. *Chilean Junta Meeting the Night of the Plebiscite*. Information Report. 01 January 1989. Accessed November 6, 2019.

liberation also meant social liberation, and combined with the legacy of the Vicaria de Solidaridad's ability to create resistance within institutions themselves, leaders in the Church began to fear they would lose their hold on the Chilean people. As a reaction to the changing political landscape, conservative Church leaders began the transition the structural makeup of the Church, putting the spiritual and political power back into the hands of the clergy.

With the background and stakes established from the first section, this segment moves forward to examine the reality and logistics of such a transition, and calls into question the motives of Church leaders and the consequences of their actions. The active and successful resistance of the Catholic Church in Chile through the Vicaria, and the increased presence of liberation theology in Latin America, created an imminent threat to the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. Where leftist ideologies promoted community based organizing and solidarity, the Catholic Church pushed hierarchy and religious obedience. The ability of the Chilean Church to occupy the role of religious leadership while also providing aid and sanctuary against a conservative military regime placed them in a precarious position with various Church leaders. Even if the Chilean Church itself did not publicly identify as a leftist political force, their opposition to Pinochet's repression as well as the human rights violations generally disregarded by the Vatican made them a thorn in the side of both parties. However, there was no doubt that the work of the Vicaria was indeed beneficial for the public image of the Vatican, and thus rejecting it or even attempting to close it down under the regime would have incited international chastisement; Pinochet knew this as well as the conservative forces in the Church. Instead, the strategic move was to await the re-introduction of democracy to Chile, and then declare the Vicaria and its community counterparts unnecessary to the development of a healthy democracy.

The dissolution of the Vicaria can be seen as a landmark for the political transition of the Church. An organization which had provided sanctuary and legal representation for those suffering under the regime, as well as catalogued and published human rights violations of the government, was suddenly deemed useless in a new democratic era. According to the Church, in its now changing conservative leadership, the duties of the Vicaria were transferred to that of the Social Pastorate, a new office that put the Vicaria's responsibilities exclusively into the hands of the clergy. This new office was inaugurated by known conservative forces in the Church, most notably Cardinal Juan Francisco Fresno who had previously relinquished his position as Archbishop of Santiago to Carlos Oviedo Cavada, the man who presented the Pastorate to the audience.²⁵ The facade of the Pastorate was briefly lived, a feeble attempt to not make the transition so abrupt. It is widely acknowledged today that the legacy of the Vicaria de Solidaridad is carried on through its continued archives, the Documentation and Archive Foundation of the Vicaria de Solidaridad located in a tangential neighborhood of Santiago.²⁶ In fact, besides the news articles reporting on the inauguration ceremony, there is little to no information available on the Social Pastorate. Most likely relegated to being a side project of already busy clergy, the Pastorate quickly faded out of the Churches main frame.

The unfortunate, and probably unforeseen, consequences of this would include a decrease in Church participation over the next three decades. Though the Church undoubtedly chose to dissolve the Vicaria with intention, it is likely they overlooked the relevance of the organization within society and thus were unable to account for the impact its dissolution would have.

Alongside other changes such as increased clerical regulation and a tilt towards conservative

²⁵ Jose Gonzalez "Vicariate Renamed, To Continue Social Work." *La Nacion*, May 12, 1993.

²⁶ "La Vicaría De La Solidaridad (1973-1992) - Memoria Chilena." Memoria Chilena: Portal. Accessed November 30, 2019. <http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3547.html>.

social preaching, the loss of community and agency within the Church, as exemplified in the end of the Vicaria, played heavily into people's disillusionment. While the Vicaria was seen by those in power as a force of leftist resistance, it was also a part of a larger culture of community participation and agreement which allowed church members a sense of agency and entitlement to the fate of their communities. Without these factors to empower locals, even in the absence of political repression, the popularity and subsequent power of the Church would be in decline.



Photo taken at the entrance of the Vicaria de Solidaridad. Military police hose down civilians attempting to enter the Vicaria. Circa 1980.



Photo taken at the entrance of what is today the offices of the Archdiocese. There is a plaque on the wall that pays tribute to the Vicaria, and where the fire truck once was stands a statue of Cardinal Silva. 2019.

Upon the decision of the plebiscite, a conference was held in Punta de Tralca to bring together a “majority” of ‘conservative’ and ‘moderate’ bishops. They met to decide how the national Church would adjust to this inauguration of democracy, and also how to best encourage national reconciliation of the crimes of the dictatorship.²⁷ It was notable that three of the bishops missing from the conference were well-known progressives, and furthermore the concluding decision expressed a hope to rely on more “traditional church doctrine,” clearly an attempt to

²⁷ Cristina D. Ferrer, “Bishops View Political Role of Church,” In *Que Pasa*. Dec 22, 1988.

move away from the leftist antics of their Latin American peers.²⁸ This meeting signals the true mark of transition. Cardinal Fresno's power as a conservative archbishop of Santiago may have been stifled by the international support of the Vicaria, but with the end of the dictatorship came the opportunity to reframe the Church's political position. With the introduction of democracy, conservatives would argue, surely there was no longer a need for an organization which documents human rights violations. They purposefully reframed the duties of the Vicaria, and various other local organizing networks, in order to regain the hierarchical approach to power they had held before Vatican II.

To understand the political motivations of this transition, it is important to identify the political actors. As previously mentioned, one of these was Cardinal Fresno, who took up the mantle of Archbishop of Santiago following the leadership of Cardinal Silva. Despite popular acclaim, there were many in the Church during the dictatorship who felt that Silva did not fully embrace the legacy of liberation theology, and thus was not radical enough in his resistance.²⁹ Perhaps an argument for this can be found in his passive transition to his successor, who publicly declared a more moderate stance of the Church upon his inauguration in 1983. Fresno's goals included "to move the church away from being a direct opponent of the Government to be more of a mediator," which church officials called a "change in tactics."³⁰ Though Fresno still supported resistance to the regime, the legacy of Cardinal Silva's open opposition to Pinochet was already being swept aside for a more moderated approach. In fact, though it was later realized by the regime that he would not necessarily cede to them, Pinochet's wife exclaimed

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Antonio Bentue, Interview by September Sky Porras. Personal Interview. Universidad Catolica en San Joaquin, Santiago de Chile, July 20, 2019.

³⁰ Edward Schumacher, "Church in Chile Defends Dissent and Urges Talks with Opposition," *The New York Times*, June 25, 1983.

“God has heard our prayers,” upon the news that Fresno would be named archbishop.³¹ He was considered “the most conservative of Chile’s bishops,” and yet had also attended Vatican II and the subsequent Medellin conference.³² Still, the era where progressive liberation theology shaped Catholic practice was quickly drawing to a close. Fresno continued to hold a traditionalist approach, and his interactions with the regime were downscaled from Silva’s near excommunication of Pinochet, to organizing talks with centrist politicians.³³

Cardinal Fresno’s time would end even before the Vicaria, as he reached the age limit of seventy-five in 1990, and handed in his resignation to Pope John Paul II. His chosen successor was Carlos Oviedo Cavada, a conservative as well, though his character was certainly much less vibrant. As the archbishop of Santiago in the time directly following a military regime, Cavada insisted on “a spirit of forgiveness and understanding.”³⁴ Considering the brutal torture many civilians underwent, as well as the loved ones who were disappeared, a “spirit of forgiveness” was a relatively conservative stance to take against the war crimes of a regime.³⁵ Furthermore, this is all with the knowledge that Augusto Pinochet would not face human rights abuse allegations, and instead would *continue* to serve as commander of the armed forces until 1998. In this position, Pinochet would purposefully disrupt attempts at human rights trials against those who had been involved with the regime, and retained immunity himself until a fateful trip to

³¹ “Juan Francisco Fresno Larrain; A conservative at odds with Chile’s regime,” *United Press International*. May 25, 1985, Saturday, AM cycle. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJB-37W0-001X-T15S-00000-00&context=1516831>.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “Pinochet Reacts to Contreras Court Ruling,” In *El Mercurio*. Jun 5, 1995.

³⁵ The “disappeared,” better known as the *desaparecidos* were all those who went missing as a result of the regime. Though their bodies were never found, it is usually assumed that, after suffering torture in detention centers, then were executed by the regime.

Europe in the late 90s, which put him in a precarious diplomatic position.³⁶ Thus, even in a democracy, the past trauma of human rights violations was discarded with little healing and no retribution. Cardinal Cavada's encouragement of forgiveness and understanding was, for many, proof that the institution which had once heavily catalogued human rights abuses and their legal ramifications no longer cared for the pursuit of such justice. Societal trauma following something as intense as a seventeen-year regime no doubt presented many problems to larger Chilean society, and yet the dismissal of it by the Church showed a significant lack of urgency and community based networking that had once made it a sanctuary to many.

Perhaps one of the key strategies in this moment of transition was the reframing of human rights as something entirely separate from political alignments. As a general concept, of course advocacy for human rights is not a position which belongs to any singular political party. However, the legacy of human rights in Chile, and more broadly in Latin America, was consistently tied to a leftist struggle against right-wing authoritarian regimes.³⁷ When Cardinal Fresno took up the mantle of archbishop, he was clear to state "Don't take me as a rightist or a leftist, just take me as a pastor who is trying to stress the unity that the Lord asks of us."³⁸ Thus, he made clear his position in favor of human rights, and yet also against the politics of liberation theology. In doing so, he pulled the popularly received human rights advocacy of the Church away from the leftist ideology of many of its lower ranking clergy and laity. Essentially making it so his socially conservative views around society and the structural formation of the Church

³⁶ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Augusto Pinochet," Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., December 6, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augusto-Pinochet>.

³⁷ Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Brazil, etc.

³⁸ "Church Leader Plays Pivotal Role in Chilean Political Conflict," The Associated Press. February 23, 1984, Thursday, PM cycle. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3S14-JSC0-0011-62VJ-00000-00&context=1516831>.

could stay intact, whilst also not completely abandoning his parishioners to the brutality of the regime; a political move which would have caused a great deal of international backlash. This reframing of human rights advocacy from a radical fight to a keeping of the peace was carried on by Cardinal Cavada in his public calls for forgiveness.

However, despite Fresno and other leaders' best efforts to reconcile Church participation with conservative hierarchical views, Catholic membership was already beginning a decline by 1990. As previously referenced, the closing of the Vicaria in 1992 provides an example of the extent to which the Church was willing to go to close down community based religious organizations, but it was certainly not the only factor of this political transition. As Fresno took office in the 1980s, he stayed fairly distant from the Vicaria itself, as well as other activist groups, and was publicly vocal concerning his socially conservative views. This was a sign for many that the Church was quickly becoming closed to the members who had made up its base structure. Father Francisco Sampedro of the Catholic Church in Santiago spoke of this development in a news publication, stating "some sectors of the hierarchy do not appreciate the lay person...."³⁹ This same article pays close attention to the rise of Evangelicalism, specifically the Pentecostal church, which provides specific roles to members seeking to engage with community activism. According to the author, "As a result of this activism, which makes them channel most of their energy towards spiritual betterment, they become more responsible and then they feel more valued by society."⁴⁰ The same sense of reasoning can be seen with the actions of *comunidades de base*—the base communities for local churches which engage in spiritual and communal organizing, vigils, support, and resistance. These *comunidades de base*

³⁹ Daniel Seisdedos, "Declining Influence of the Catholic Church Viewed," In *Que Pasa*. Nov 12, 1990.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

are few and far between today, but during the time directly before and during the dictatorship they made up much of the Catholic communities, and undoubtedly provided this sense of responsibility and value the article underlines.

Other studies have confirmed this downward trend. In a sociological survey conducted by Matías Andrés Bargsted and Nicolás De la Cerda, they use political alignment, religious affiliation, and church attendance as a means through which to measure the trends of political de-alignment experienced in Chile in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The research shows a sustained decline in the Chilean Catholic population, specifically those that attend mass regularly.⁴¹ Another interesting take away from the survey and accompanying analysis is the downward trend for right-wing Catholics. At first glance, this finding is in tension with an argument for a rise in Catholic conservatism, but the survey itself does not separate its findings between Church attending and non-Church attending Catholics, nor does it account for the general decrease in the population of Chilean Catholics specifically. Thus, this decrease can be accounted for in the makeup of mass itself, as the changing dynamics of the Church in the 90's allowed for much more conservative homilies focused on social morals.⁴² Therefore, it is still fair to assume those who actually attend the mass will likely be of a more conservative variety. Another finding in this research which underlines the centrality of the Catholic Church specifically, is that the same trends of decrease are *not* found in the Evangelical community.⁴³ In fact, as the previous news article mentioned, there has been a continual rise in the Evangelical community in Chile. In the context of this discussion, this is likely due to the fact that Catholics

⁴¹ Matías Andrés Bargsted and Nicolás De la Cerda, "Ideological Preferences and Evolution of the Religious Cleavage in Chile, 1998–2014." *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 2 (June 25, 2019).

⁴² I have taken this view upon reflection on my interview with Antonio Bentue, a Chilean theologian whom I interviewed on the topic of this changing political dynamic in the Chilean Catholic Church.

⁴³ Matías Andrés Bargsted and Nicolás De la Cerda, "Ideological Preferences and Evolution of the Religious Cleavage in Chile, 1998–2014." *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 2 (June 25, 2019).

and Evangelicals do not have the same leadership nor the same history in the nation of Chile; the guidance of Catholic Church leaders has then found their Church in a very different situation in the twenty-first century.

Another set of research which documents this decrease in the importance of Catholic life in Chile is a survey conducted by the World Values Survey. WVS is a network of social scientists attempting to document changing values within communities, and how those values impact social lives and perspectives. Their surveys ask questions which range from opinions on social morals and family life, to involvement in political organizations. In order to track the value which participants place on various sectors of their life, the surveys functions which a numerical system; participants use 1 to indicate Very Important, 2 as Rather Important, 3 as Not Very Important, and 4 as Not At All Important. In the questionnaire from 1990, a large majority of participants individually ranked belonging to a human rights group, belonging to a religious organization, doing unpaid volunteer work for a religious group, and doing unpaid volunteer work for a human rights group as either 1 or 2 in the set of importance. By the time of the next questionnaire, in 1996, answers changed drastically. While a large majority still answered that they were religious, there was a striking decrease in the value with which they placed active membership to a voluntary religious organization, now marked at an indifferent 3. This change is only further substantiated by the questionnaire from 2000, which shows a much more diverse set of responses when participants were asked how often they attend Church.⁴⁴ In a country once highly devout, many across the board responded by saying they attended only once a month, and certainly less than they used to. The downward trajectory exemplified by the World Value

⁴⁴ Inglehart, R., C. Haerper, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.). 2014. World Values Survey: Round Three - Country-Pooled Datafile Version: www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV3.jsp. Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

Survey questionnaire continues to support the claim that spiritually and emotionally, Chileans feel more and more removed from their religious life.

CONCLUSION

In the summer of 2019, I found myself wandering the halls of the Universidad Catolica San Joaquin campus in Santiago. I had a scheduled meeting with acclaimed theologian Antonio Bentue, a contact I received thanks to a happy coincidence of befriending the family of a prominent leftist late bishop. We sat down to talk, and I began with the questions I had prepared talking about the history of the Church in Chile, the impact of the Vicaria, and various other notes for clarification. Still, it became apparent in the midst of our discussion that there was a bitter sort of sentiment, and I let the conversation drift as we began to talk about the Church today. “There is no solidarity,” he said, and went to explain that after he spent time in Spain, he had returned to Chile post-dictatorship to find the culture of neoliberalism already very strong.⁴⁵ What he meant by this was that the democratic era also meant one based in capitalism; it was this that the Catholic Church upheld when they decided to close the Vicaria. It was a culture of only looking out for oneself, of neglect towards the themes of community which had so strongly governed the era of dictatorship. For the Catholic Church in Chile, this meant holding parishioners and their communities at somewhat of a distance. That distance, as Bentue pointed out, has only increased since the reveal of shocking sex abuse scandals within the Church. He was surprised to hear that I did not know that three of Santiago’s main bishops were forced into resignation by Pope Francis after their inaction and collusion in the cover up of the cases was revealed. Presently, Santiago has virtually no official Catholic leadership. There are higher

⁴⁵ Antonio Bentue, Interview by September Sky Porras. Personal Interview. Universidad Catolica en San Joaquin, Santiago de Chile, July 20, 2019.

ranking clergy who currently hold the duties assigned to the office of the bishops, but the Pope has neglected to instate any new leadership, and the clergy in charge have very little power alongside their administrative responsibilities. In the end, I had to agree with Bentue; it *was* surprising that I had not heard of this, but perhaps it was also telling. Even in my research on the history of the Church, many modern Chileans I spoke with felt so distanced from the Church that even the shocking reality that Santiago essentially had no Catholic leadership was a side story for them. The earth shaking realizations of the sex abuse scandals, in addition to the already bitter reflection that their communal Church had been taken from them, has left many progressive Chileans estranged.

This collection of materials, including the personal interviews which I conducted during my time in Santiago, have made clear the motivations of leaders within the Church following the fall of Pinochet. In an era of Catholic progressivism, specifically amidst the popularity of liberation theology, the conservative Church leaders in Chile who managed to reclaim their power set about undoing the community based organization that the Church of the dictatorship, and specifically the Vicaria de Solidaridad, had laid out. Motivated by a fear of social liberation in a time of democracy, as well as fear of the Vicaria's ability to resist institutionalized power from within an institution itself, leaders such as Cardinals Fresno and Oviedo—amongst others—reverted the Church to a strict hierarchical structure. The result of this, anticipated or not, has been the gradual decline of Catholic membership, mass attendance, and religious organizing in Chile. Chileans do not just feel distanced from their Church, they feel abandoned by it. In the end, conservative Church desires for control outweighed the importance of active participation, and the collateral damage has been the religious beliefs of an entire post-dictatorship generation of Chileans.

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