

# Solidarity

The Role of the Catholic Church  
in Chile's Transition to Democracy,  
1973-1988

Emily Zoellner  
Comprehensive Exercise in International Relations  
Advised by Professor Montero  
Carleton College  
Winter 2006

## *Introduction*

On September 11, 1973 a military coup plunged Chile into an era of dictatorship that would last until 1989. Latin America's longest standing democracy was converted to a place devoid of personal liberties, where state-sanctioned torture was routine. Today a casual visitor to Chile would hardly have cause to suspect that it had ever been anything other than a democratic place. This remarkable transition from endless, euphemistically called "states of exception" to peaceful policy debates was not always smooth. The end result – a free and democratic state – was in no way guaranteed (Remmer, 1989).

There is much debate over the mechanics of Chile's transition from military dictatorship to democracy. Some argue that the dictatorship declined due to the failure of the imposed neo-liberal economic model, or because the labor movement unified in a series of national strikes that stalled the country in 1983 and again in 1986 (Angell, 1991). Still others claim that the revival of political parties spelled the end of dictatorship (Drake and Jaksic, 1991: 11-12).<sup>1</sup> Most agree that opposition groups worked tirelessly throughout the era to defend human rights and reclaim the democratic process; however, opinions differ as to the effectiveness of these groups and the extent to which they played a critical role in the transition (Constable and Valenzuela, 1991).

The Catholic Church played a singularly complex role among opposition groups. The Vicaría de la Solidaridad, henceforth referred to as the Vicaría, a pastoral program that sought to defend human rights, is widely recognized as a model human rights organization (Quiroga, Reiter, Zunzunegui, 1986).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, a group of conservative priests offered their support for the devout Pinochet. The bishops of Chile agreed not to offer official support for either side (Fleet and Smith, 1997: 134). The controversy over the church's political stance is well exemplified in Pope John Paul II's visit to Chile in April of 1987: both the opposition

movement and Pinochet supporters saw the Pope's visit as a victory (Constable and Valenzuela, 1991). Indeed, the Pope's itinerary in Chile included everything from meeting with Carmen Quintana, an 18 year old who was horribly disfigured when, after a protest she was doused with gasoline and lit on fire by police officers, to blessing a chapel inside La Moneda<sup>3</sup> for General Pinochet (Constable and Valenzuela, 1991: 298). The debate over the Pope's true reason for visiting raged both in Chile and abroad, and is indicative of the diversity of political identities among Chilean Catholics.

In this paper, I will explore the experience of the Vicaría during the military dictatorship and evaluate its success as a voice of opposition in Chile. I will assert that the success of the Vicaría as an opposition group came as a result of both the strength and diversity of Church leadership and the political awareness of the Vicaría. To do this, I will investigate the development of the Vicaría from its predecessor, the Committee of Cooperation for Peace in Chile (COPACHI),<sup>4</sup> and analyze key changes in the organization's leadership. By assessing the successes of the Vicaría as an opposition force, I will determine what lessons can be gleaned from their experience. I will compare the actions of the Chilean Catholic Church during the military dictatorship with the actions taken by other Latin American Churches under similar circumstances in order to place the Chilean Catholic Church in a broader historical and geographic context. I will also examine how the Vicaría related with the other institutions in order to better place it in the context of democratic transition. By examining how these groups interacted, I hope to gain a better sense of the Vicaría's importance as a key actor in transition. This close analysis of the Vicaría's actions during the dictatorship will allow me to contribute to the debate on the role of religion in democratic transition in Chile.

In the attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of different actors in democratization, there is need for a unifying definition of success. I agree with Manuel Antonio Garretón's assertion that:

the value and success of opposition forces are measured not only by the collapse of a regime or by the total replacement of its mission but also by partial successes. Such achievements may include a variety of endeavors: creating relatively free spaces; launching new courses of action; defending certain rights, persons, and organizations; maintaining hope for an alternative government; instilling in new sectors traditions that offer the hope of an alternative; making gradual inroads into the regime itself; and organizing sectoral resistance in various social spheres (Garretón, 1989: 164-165).

Using this definition, the Vicaría was a successful opposition group in that it adamantly and outspokenly defended human rights, understood the legal structure of the military regime and used this understanding to defend political prisoners, empowered the Chilean public by setting up communally-run soup kitchens, mobilized citizens in massive protests, and provided civic education and voter registration that led to the defeat of General Pinochet in the 1988 Plebiscite. I argue that the success of the Vicaría as an opposition group came as a result of the diversity within the Chilean Catholic Church and its ability to recognize and adapt to the political realities during the military dictatorship. The Vicaría could appeal to other human rights groups as an ally and at the same time avoid being banned by the dictatorship because of differences in political and doctrinal views among Church leadership. Under the guarded umbrella of the Catholic Church, the Vicaría was able to exist as an opposition group free from some of the problems that plagued other such entities. Additionally, their understanding of the contemporary political environment allowed them to operate strategically in relation to the government and make informed legal claims using the dictatorship's own constitution.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The Chilean Catholic Church and Democratic Transition*

While there is a wealth of literature analyzing Chile's transition to democracy, and democratization in general, few of these sources focus solely on the role played by the Vicaría. The Vicaría is cited often as an exemplary human rights organization, but its specific role in the

process of democratization has not been exhaustively examined. The aim of my paper is to combine an analysis of the Vicaría's human rights work with an understanding of how this work fits into the historical context of democratic transition. Thus, a variety of the sources I will be using do not explicitly discuss how and why the Vicaría was successful. Instead, they focus on either the Catholic Church as whole or on individual actors such as Cardinals Silva and Fresno. It is my hope to combine these analyses into an exploration of the Vicaría itself. Through a close empirical analysis of one specific group, I hope to contribute to the debate on the role of religion in democratic transition in Chile. This is a worthy topic of study, and one that has not been extensively examined.

There is little debate among scholars that the Vicaría was an admirable defendant of human rights during the military dictatorship. Its accomplishments in assisting the jobless, the persecuted, and women in particular<sup>6</sup> have been touted by a variety of writers. There is, however, a greater debate about the role that the Vicaría played in affecting the transition to democracy in Chile. While some claim that the Church's role as a mediator and leader of protest movements helped insure a peaceful transition to democracy, others insist that the transition came about for other reasons. Among those that believe that the Vicaría was a successful opposition voice, there is still a debate as to why it was so successful.

One explanation for the Church's success states that it was in effect the only social organization able to carry on operations in the immediate aftermath of the coup, and that, as such, it took on an important symbolic and practical role. In his work *Church and Politics in Chile*, Brian H. Smith asserts that in the early days of the military government, the Catholic Church was effectively the only institution able to maintain normal operations: "while all other major social organizations in the country had been outlawed or placed under heavy surveillance

or in recess, the Church was the one remaining institution allowed to function openly” (Smith, 1982: 289). Because of this role as the sole remaining vestige of a formerly vibrant civil society, the Church began to take other groups under its care. The relationship between the Church and labor movements remained strong through the 1980s – having previously worked together, the Vicaría and labor groups came together to organize mass protests in 1983 (*Vicaría de la Solidaridad, Octavo de labor 1983*, 1984). Later on in the attempted negotiations for a National Accord, the church mediated discussions between and among groups with which it had previously worked, including political parties, other human rights organization, and private sector businesses (Fleet and Smith, 1997: 121). The success of these other groups cannot be divorced from the success of the Vicaría because the groups would not have been able to operate without the protective overarching structure of the Catholic Church.

Not all agree with this proposition. A key argument against the Church as a necessary and successful actor in transition is the failure of the National Accord in 1985. Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela, in their work *A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet*, recognize the role of Cardinal Juan Francisco Fresno<sup>7</sup> in negotiating the terms of the National Accord for Transition to Full Democracy, but they still view the failure of the National Accord as evidence of the failure of the Church to affect change (Constable and Valenzuela, 1991: 291-292). It is a fact that the National Accord did fail in 1985 when Pinochet refused to accept its demands; however, as Fleet and Smith acknowledge, Fresno’s role in the negotiation of the pact had a longer term effect in bringing together diverse political parties:

Although rejected by the government, the National Accord was more substantial and successful than the dialogue with Jarpa. It made important inroads in political circles and in public opinion generally...It was the broadest coalition of forces to date to call for the restoration of democracy” (Fleet and Smith, 1997: 124).

Despite the failure of the National Accord, and Fresno's ensuing personal feeling of defeat, I agree with Fleet and Smith that the negotiation process itself had a positive impact on the eventual transition to democracy and that Cardinal Fresno was indeed a key actor in the transition.

Even among those who believe that the Church was a necessary actor in Chilean democratization, there is still a debate as to how and why it attained this important role. There is a strong case to be made for the importance of the Chilean Church's ability to appeal to all sectors of society. Compared to other Churches in Latin America, the Chilean Church was more moderate. The Chilean Church can best be described as progressive rather than liberationist, although Liberation Theology<sup>8</sup> was present in some form (Figa and Johnston, 1988: 2). The shortage of Chilean priests resulted in an influx of foreign, predominantly quite liberal, priests (Löwy, 1996: 43).<sup>9</sup> However, the strength of groups like Opus Dei,<sup>10</sup> which was more closely aligned with the military right, proved to be a moderating force (Figa and Johnston, 1988). Unlike in Brazil, where liberationists were of greater influence,<sup>11</sup> or in Argentina, where traditionalists were complicit during the torture of thousands of Argentines,<sup>12</sup> in Chile, the Church played a moderate and widely-respected role. Cristián Parker points out the legacy of heterogeneity within the Catholic Church as a possible explanation for its success in affecting change (Parker, 1991). The Church in Chile had historically been an institution of diverse political orientations. During the dictatorship, the Church, and specifically the Vicaría, could use this experience with negotiation and flexibility to relate to and communicate with the military regime.

The drastically different characteristics of Cardinals Silva and Fresno illustrate the strength and diversity of the Catholic leadership in Chile. The unique personal qualities and

leadership styles of the two Cardinals helped to make the Vicaría a successful institution. While Silva was a close friend of Salvador Allende and openly criticized the Pinochet government, Fresno actually celebrated the 1973 coup early on, seeing it is necessary to rid the country of Socialism (Smith, 1982: 287-288). Silva's charismatic, populist stature was necessary in the early days of the opposition. He emphasized the need for rule of law and human rights, drawing upon issues discussed at the Second Vatican Council in 1962-1963 and subsequent Episcopal Conference at Medellín in 1969 (Loveman, 1986-1987: 7).<sup>13</sup> As Fleet and Smith assert, Cardinal Fresno was a much more subdued and conservative figure, and in that respect a better negotiator. Although his appointment as bishop was celebrated by the regime who thought him more conservative, it likely aided the opposition more than it did the government. In Fresno, the Church had a leader that was seen as moderate and capable of negotiation. This gave the Church the ability to facilitate and moderate discussions between and among political parties, the military government, and private sector interests (Fleet and Smith, 1997).

### *The Study*

In order to analyze the Vicaría's success and development during the military dictatorship I have utilized a variety of sources. Chief among these are documents from the Vicaría's Center of Documentation and Archives and their Juridical Department. The sources I consulted include: press releases, texts of sermons and public declarations delivered by religious leaders, transcripts from meetings of the Episcopal Conferences, prepared annual reports of the Vicaría's activities, photos of protests, and catalogs of Law Decrees passed by the Pinochet government. I reviewed these documents at the Vicaría's headquarters in Santiago, and have since supplemented these primary sources with articles from journals as well as with scholarly texts on the history of church-state relations in Chile, different types of opposition movements,

and other related topics. While the Vicaría's Documentation Center has been lauded as one of the most comprehensive records of human rights abuses and legal records in Latin America (Bickford, 2000: 165-166), I have augmented my research there with other texts because my attempt is to evaluate the Vicaría's success, and to do so using only documents published by the Vicaría would be to compromise objectivity.

### *Development of the Vicaría*

The Vicaría's success is due, at least in part, to the manner in which it emerged as a human rights institution. Learning from the mistakes of an earlier religiously-based human rights organization allowed the Vicaría to function effectively from its inception. When the Archbishopric of Santiago founded the Vicaría in January of 1976, the groundwork for the organization had already been established by its predecessor, COPACHI. The Vicaría's leaders learned from the shortcomings of this earlier organization. COPACHI was formed less than a month after the military coup, in October of 1973, and the urgency of such an emergence made it difficult for the organization to function effectively: it was forever plagued with disorganization. COPACHI began operations when it did not because it was prepared to do so, but because the need was so great. Church leaders were inundated with congregants approaching them for help in the days immediately following the coup, as many were imprisoned and even killed, and COPACHI was created as a way for leaders of different religious communities to unify in their defense of victims of the military coup. When COPACHI was formed, the general consensus was that the military coup was temporary, and thus the initial lack of clear organization was not seen as a major problem. Those who established COPACHI did not anticipate the need for a long term opposition to the regime (Lowden, 1993).

It became increasingly clear that the dictatorship was not going away when, in November of 1975, General Pinochet publicly called for the dissolution of COPACHI. In October, priests associated with COPACHI had been accused of aiding MIR operatives.<sup>14</sup> This event, in addition to inflammatory anti-regime comments made by Carlos Camus,<sup>15</sup> a Catholic leader, to foreign press earlier that year caused the relationship between COPACHI and the government, which had never been very good, to further deteriorate (Aguilar, 2003). The Vicaría was founded when it became evident that the oppressive government was not about to loosen its hold on Chile and that there was need for a more organized unit to defend human rights (“Del Comité Para la Paz a la Vicaría de la Solidaridad: la institucionalización de la defense de los derechos humanos”, 1990).

Aside from the need for the establishment of a legal defense team, there are other reasons that the Vicaría was necessary to succeed COPACHI. COPACHI was an ecumenical organization, founded by Helmut Frenz of the Lutheran Church and Fernando Ariztía of the Catholic Church. Although the many religious groups that comprised COPACHI agreed upon the need for the defense of human rights, the diversity of faiths made COPACHI vulnerable to the military government. Frenz, as well as other leaders of COPACHI, were foreign nationals, not Chilean citizens.<sup>16</sup> Their ability to live in and operate their churches in Chile was dependent on government support, which made it difficult for these leaders to take assertive stances against the regime (“Del Comité para la paz a la Vicaría de la Solidaridad: la institucionalización de la defense de los derechos humanos”, 1990).

The Vicaría, however, was formally tied to the Catholic Church. Because of this connection, the Vicaría was protected from some of the issues that had plagued COPACHI. While there was originally controversy within the Catholic Church over its formal support for

the Vicaría, the arrest in 1976 of Hernán Montealegre Klener helped to ensure the support of even the more conservative factions in the Church. Klener was a lawyer who worked for the Vicaría, and his rather arbitrary arrest symbolized to many the ruthlessness of the regime in dealing with opposition: that they were willing to go after a member of a Catholic institution caused many moderate priests to take a stronger stance in favor of human rights (“Del Comité para la paz a la Vicaría de la Solidaridad: la institucionalización de la defensa de los derechos humanos”, 1990).

### *The Vicaría as a Defender of Human rights*

Once Klener was arrested, and as more and more Church leaders became convinced of the need to defend human rights, the Vicaría could begin its work in earnest without having to expend as much effort dealing with internal Church politics. The Departamento Jurídico, or Legal Department, was founded in 1976. By 1980 it had expanded to include departments in charge of aiding individuals tried and sentenced, handling legal denunciation of fundamental human rights violations, supporting exiles attempts to re-enter Chile, analyzing legal precedents, and protecting personal liberties. The number of total cases handled by the legal department reached nearly 17,000 by 1980 (Lowden, 1996: 77).

One reason for this growth in the legal department of the Vicaría is that, at the same time, Pinochet’s government was consolidating power by enacting a variety of legal decrees. Chile was in a state of “Public Calamity” from 1973 until 1980. While each State of Emergency could only last for six months, Pinochet simply re-declared a State of Public Calamity each six months for seven years, until in 1980 the new Chilean Constitution was put into effect. During these States of Public Calamity, individuals who were arrested needed to appear before military courts because the country was considered to be suffering from problems of national security - political

detainees were considered enemies of the state (“Estado de Emergencia: Declaraciones y Facultades”). This consolidation of government power was likely the motivation for the Vicaría’s increased emphasis on legal issues: the changing legal structure of the regime required careful study.

In addition to defending human rights by offering legal aid to political prisoners, the Vicaría also set up soup kitchens, workshops where women whose husbands were detained could earn a living, and medical and psychological services to those who had been tortured and their family members. The *ollas comúnas*, or soup kitchens, were particularly effective not only in providing meals to those who needed them, but also in empowering the impoverished. The Vicaría started these operations and provided space for them, but the actual leaders of each individual kitchen were members of the given community. Instead of doling out food as a charity, the Vicaría helped communities to help themselves, preserving the dignity of the poor and promoting communal solidarity (Parker, 1991: 54). As inflation and unemployment grew in the early 1980s, more and more Chileans utilized these services. The economic crisis of 1982-1983 resulted in a nearly four-fold increase in *comerciantes ambulantes*, or street vendors, in the span of three months. At the same time, incidents of domestic abuse and child prostitution, particularly in Santiago, increased drastically (*Vicaría de la Solidaridad: Octavo año de labor 1983, 1984*).

The first wave of national protests broke out in 1983 against the backdrop of these increases in inflation and unemployment. The Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC) called for the first major protest, which took place on May 11, 1983. The size of the protest surprised even those who organized it – the banging of pots was heard even in wealthy neighborhoods (Garretón, 1991: 219). The role of the Vicaría, and the Catholic Church in general, in these

national protests was complex. Some argue that the protests would not have been possible had the Vicaría not begun the work of empowering working class communities (Lowden, 1996), while others argue that the Church did not have much of a role initiating protest and that the importance of the Vicaría was in its ability to deal with the aftermath of the protests. Those who argue that the Church's role was secondary see the success of the initial protests as evidence of the resurgence of labor unions. There is some truth in both assessments: to the extent that the Vicaría's programs in poor Santiago communities had helped to create a sense of unity among lower classes, they made possible an environment in which the first protests could occur. However, the role of the labor unions and political organizations in organizing the protests was of undeniable significance.

The role of the Vicaría in relation to the protests began to change as time passed and the government began to react forcefully to those protesting. Following the second wave of national protests in June, 1983, the Episcopal Committee of Chile issued a harshly worded statement condemning the use of violence to put down protests (Comité Permanente del Episcopado, 1983). Church leaders reaffirmed the right to dissent, indicating their willingness to support protests.

The Vicaría's work shifted from one of support for protests to one of dealing with the aftermath of the protests as the military government began responding more forcefully to demonstrations. As arrests and injuries inflicted by the military during protests increased, so too did the numbers of people seeking assistance at the Vicaría. The Vicaría's records show that by the 5<sup>th</sup> round of protests in September of 1983, the peaceful nature of the first protest was a distant memory: in Santiago alone, twenty-seven individuals incurred bullet wounds, five were

killed, and 266 were taken into police custody (“Casos de Detención Ingresados y Atendidos por la Vicaría de la Solidaridad, entre los días 8 y 13 de septiembre de 1983”, 1983).

These numbers are dwarfed when compared with the protests of 1986. During these protests, police took to driving through working class communities and detaining all men and youths who were congregating out of doors. Additionally, homes in these communities were regularly ransacked by the military in search of evidence of subversion (*Vicaría de la Solidaridad: undécimo año de labor 1986*, 1987). Oppression as a whole increased in 1986: cases of torture reached the highest points since the days immediately following the coup in 1973. Particularly disturbing was the role of doctors in torture, who were present to observe detainees and at times administer amnesia-inducing pills (“Chile: Cincuenta casos de Tortura,” 1987). The role of medical professionals as accomplices to the military in torture, while unsettling, is not entirely unexpected. Especially by 1986, when the regime’s longevity had come into question, members of the upper and professional classes who benefited from the neoliberal economic model became worried. Pinochet’s economic model had increased poverty and unemployment among the working class and widened the gap between rich and poor. It is likely that fear rose among the upper classes as protests raged, meetings took place between opposition groups, political parties, and the government; and a return to democracy emerged as a real possibility. This fear was furthered by the assassination attempt on Pinochet in September of 1986 and the discovery of a large weapons arsenal in August of that year, both tied to FPMR, Frente Popular Manuel Rodríguez (Garretón, 1991).

#### *The Vicaría’s Role in Mediation*

The role of Church leadership as mediators in discussions between government leaders and civil society organizations was crucial in bridging vast gaps between the groups. Although

mediation attempts were unsuccessful in attaining an immediate return to democracy, the actions taken by the Vicaría were successful to the extent that they began an important dialogue among disparate political entities. Mediation attempts between the Pinochet government and opposition political parties and organizations began in 1983, as Archbishop Fresno arranged talks between Interior Minister Sergio Onofre Jarpa and moderate opposition leaders. When Pinochet appointed Jarpa in 1983, he gave him authority to meet with opposition leaders with the intent of calming protests. Thus, when Jarpa sat down to meet with opposition leaders, his goal was not to truly negotiate an opening of the authoritarian regime, but rather to give the appearance of doing so in order to put an end to the growing protests (Fleet and Smith, 1997: 120). However, the act of even meeting with opposition leaders at all was significant. By participating in talks with members of the new Democratic Alliance, Jarpa was accepting this group as a legitimate entity. These meetings took place at Fresno's residence, and his role as a mediator was critical. Fleet and Smith describe this mediating presence as important: "The Church's auspices and presence made it easier for people to meet and to hear one another's proposals. No one was giving in to anyone else; all were deferring to a widely respected third party" (1997: 120). The 1983 talks eventually failed: neither side could come to accept the demands of the other.

In March of 1985, a new round of negotiations began, this time surrounding the issue of a National Accord. Talks were again held at Fresno's residence, and included former treasury minister under the Frei government Sergio Molina, businessman José Zabala, and Fernando Leniz, who had previously served in Pinochet's cabinet as treasury minister. Pope John Paul II named Fresno Cardinal in June of 1985, and this higher status served to enhance Fresno's prestige as a negotiator. The group eventually drafted the National Accord on the Transition to

Full Democracy in July of 1985 (Fleet and Smith, 1997: 122). By August, the Accord was signed by members of the National Union Movement, the Liberal, Republican, National, Christian Democratic, Radical, Christian Left and Social Democratic parties. While the document did not call for the immediate ousting of Pinochet, it did call for immediate “normalization” of political life: an end to States of Exception and exile. Additionally, the Accord had provisions for direct presidential elections. The Accord failed when Pinochet refused to sign it, although there is speculation that some high-ranking members of the military did support it (Lowden, 1996: 110). Despite the fact that the National Accord was never put into practice, the process of its creation demonstrated that the opposition movement had solidified and that diverse political parties were willing to work with each other to ensure a return to democracy.

#### *The Vicaría's Role in Civic Education and Voter Registration*

The increased cooperation among political parties was also evident in the mobilization efforts prior to the 1988 plebiscite. While many groups had boycotted the 1980 plebiscite,<sup>17</sup> diverse opposition groups operated together in 1988 to register voters, provide civic education and draw international attention to the vote. The Vicaría played an important role in mobilizing for the 1988 plebiscite. Much of the Vicaría's efforts leading up to the plebiscite involved convincing citizens that the vote would be secret. A report by the International Human Rights Law Group found that, in early 1988, nearly one third of Chileans did not believe that the ballot would be secret (Browning, Dinerstein, et al, 1988). The challenge faced by opposition groups was not to convince citizens that the country would be better off without Pinochet in power, but rather to convince them that they would be safe if they voted against the regime. To this end, the Vicaría published a series of civic education pamphlets from 1987 to 1988, focusing on topics

such as free election guarantees, the relationship between political participation and faith, and the ethical obligations of Catholics. These *cartillas* featured quotes from Pope John Paul II, bible verses, and cartoon-like pictures of Chileans eagerly approaching polling places (*Cartillas 1-6*, 1988).

Despite these attempts at civic education, it is important to remember that the Vicaría and Catholic Church did not officially support either the yes or no vote in the 1988 plebiscite. The Episcopal Committee announced that church space could only be used for activities such as registering voters, not for inculcating a specific opinion or voting preference (Cancino Troncoso, 1997). In practice, however; this ruling was implemented in diverse ways. Regional Church leaders as well as heads of individual parishes were autonomous enough to follow or not follow the Episcopal Committee's order as they saw fit (Lowden, 1996). The different ways in which the various priests and Church leaders acted in response to the Episcopal Committee's recommendation are indicative of the diversity present within the Chilean Catholic Church.

#### *Diversity and Strength of Leadership in the Church*

One of the Chilean Church's greatest strengths during the dictatorship was its diversity and moderate stance. This moderate position is particularly striking in the context of Latin America. In an era that saw the assassination of the liberationist Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador and the silent complacency of the Argentinean Church in the face of government-sanctioned torture, the Chilean Church's ability to negotiate with the government while speaking out against clear human rights abuses is all the more admirable. The Church was able to operate effectively because its universal appeal made it politically impossible for Pinochet to take strong action against it (Figa and Johnston, 1988). The dependence of the Pinochet regime on the business community, among whom Opus Dei was a strong force, impeded the government from

disallowing Church activities (Remmer, 1989). Additionally, Pinochet used spiritual claims to attempt to attain legitimacy for the 1973 coup. He was forced to ally with the Church, at least nominally, in order to maintain his claim that the coup was necessary to lead Chile to a more traditional and religious path (Figa and Johnston, 1988: 33).

The Church well understood the existing political realities, and used their own internal structure and flexibility to react to and deal with the Pinochet government effectively. While it might seem that such diversity could impede the Church from acting in a consistent way and hinder its attempts to ensure a peaceful transition to democracy, the differences in the Church actually served to make it a more effective voice of opposition. The Vicaría was able to sustain diversity without falling into internal chaos due to the strength of its two vastly different, but equally capable leaders: Cardinals Raúl Silva Henríquez and Juan Francisco Fresno.

Cardinal Silva was a populist at heart. He was most at home with people – he regularly spoke with workers, met with victims of torture, and gave interviews to journalists from around the world. He spoke what he felt, and received rebuke from a variety of sources for his close associations with Allende and other socialist leaders. At one point in 1978 the magazine *El Cronista* even accused him of being a Soviet Spy (Reyes Alvarez, 1999). Despite these accusations, Silva remains a beloved figure to most Chileans. His face adorns the 500 peso coin, and a statue of him is prominently displayed in the Plaza de Armas in Santiago, outside of the Vicaría's old headquarters. Silva's insistent repetition that each man be considered a person with liberty, dignity, and the right to preside over his own actions became the Vicaría's unifying motto: *todo hombre tiene derecho a ser persona* (every man has the right to be a person) (Aguilar, 2003). It is important to consider, however; that Silva's support for human rights and harsh critiques of the Pinochet government were based on more than just his political

convictions. He based his arguments on biblical evidence and on precedents established at the Second Vatican Council of 1962-3, where the Church formally agreed upon the existence of fundamental, inviolable human rights to life and liberty. Silva often quoted Pope John Paul II in statements on the need for political consciousness (Aguilar, 2003).

Cardinal Fresno led the Chilean Church in a much different way. Although he supported the Vicaría and other pastoral programs, he was not as outspoken as Silva had been. He was a more moderate, or even conservative figure, and his appointment to succeed Silva in 1983 was considered a victory for the dictatorship (Fleet and Smith, 1997: 116). Upon assuming the post of archbishop, however; Fresno surprised many by maintaining the programs that Silva had originated, including the Vicaría. He proved that he was willing to take a stand in defense of human rights when, in 1985, José Manuel Parada was found murdered. Parada, a worker at the Vicaría, was a vocal opponent of the Pinochet government, and his death, presumably at the hands of the military police, was a huge blow to the Vicaría. Fresno issued a declaration publicly denouncing unequivocally the kidnapping and murder of Parada, and calling for an end to politically motivated violence (Fresno, 1985). In addition, Fresno worked with political and business leaders beginning in 1983 to reach an agreement on a return to democracy. This type of mediating role of the Church would not have been possible under Silva, who never had the trust of the regime (Lowden, 1996). The different leadership styles of Silva and Fresno made each Cardinal well suited to the era in which he led. Silva's charisma and populist energy was necessary at the beginning of the dictatorship to organize opposition to human rights violations. Fresno's ability to negotiate was an asset later, as a return to democracy became more probable.

### *The Vicaría's Relationship with Other Actors in Democratization*

In attempting to judge the effectiveness of the Vicaría as an opposition group, it is necessary to examine its role in collaboration with other such groups. Such analysis can allow for a more clear understanding of how the Vicaría fits into the picture of Chilean democratization as a whole. The most clear example of the Vicaría's ability to work in conjunction with other groups can be seen in the mediations presided over by Cardinal Fresno in 1983 and again in 1985. The drafting of the National Accord in 1985 was truly a key moment in the transition. It proved that political parties were once again functioning, and that the rifts among them from the pre-coup era had healed enough for them to cooperate in their mission to transition back to democracy (Fleet and Smith, 1997).

Other instances of coordination between the Vicaría and opposition groups include protests, and mobilization for the 1988 plebiscite. Labor unions led massive protests and work stoppages in 1983 and again in 1986; the CTC in particular was effective in organizing these protests. The church's role in the protest era was not one of direct organization but instead one of support for the right to protest and, in the aftermath of protests, of defending those taken into police and military custody (*Vicaría de la Solidaridad: Unodécimo año de labor, 1986, 1987*). With regards to the 1988 plebiscite, the Church was one of several organizations aiming to register voters. Other institutions were more explicit in their attempts to assure support for the 'No' vote, but among groups the Church was uniquely successful in educating voters as to their rights in the democratic process. By providing civic education for citizens in the form of pamphlets and workshops, the Church was as effective, if not more so, than groups that simply sought support for the 'No' option. Additionally, the use of Church buildings for civic education activities gave them an air of legitimacy in the eyes of Chileans. The Vicaría was able to

overcome the fear held by many Chileans of unfair elections and the consequences of voting against Pinochet by utilizing quotes from respected figures such as Pope John Paul II to convince people that political participation was consistent with Catholic theology. The international attention that the Church was able to attract to the 1988 plebiscite also aided in ensuring that it would be a fair election. Using its prestige, the Church was an effective figure in encouraging Chileans to vote in the 1988 plebiscite (Fleet and Smith, 1997).

### *Conclusions*

To the extent that the Catholic Church and the Vicaría spoke out against human rights abuses, defended the right to protest, registered voters for the 1988 plebiscite, and attained the respect and admiration of Chileans, they were successful actors in Chile's transition from dictatorship to democracy. While the labor movement provided the crucial role of organizing protests and the political parties provided hope for a future democratic culture, the Church's role was in protecting other opposition groups in the early days of the coup, providing legal defense to detainees, delivering basic social services to some of Chile's most impoverished citizens, and registering and educating voters prior to the 1988 plebiscite. The Church's effective leadership and keen ability to adapt to the changing political climate throughout the dictatorship made these actions possible.

Scholars have understated the importance of the Church in the Chilean democratic transition. Many express respect for the Church's human rights work during the dictatorship but argue that such work was not politically significant (Constable and Valenzuela, 1991). My findings suggest that the role played by the Catholic Church and, in particular, the Vicaría de la Solidaridad, did have strong political implications. By providing legal counsel to victims of oppression, empowering impoverished citizens through communal soup kitchens, negotiating

with political party and regime leaders to develop a National Accord and open political dialogue, and registering and educating voters for the 1988 plebiscite that spelled the end of Pinochet's rule, the Vicaría de la Solidaridad took a clear stand in defense of human rights. In the context of a harsh military dictatorship, such a stand must be seen as not only symbolically admirable, but also evidence of the Vicaría's success as a voice of political opposition in Chile.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Political parties were dissolved in 1974 according to Law Decree 1697. See (Departamento Jurídico, 1986) for more Law Decrees.

<sup>2</sup> The Vicaría was also awarded the United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights in 1978, commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

<sup>3</sup> La Moneda, Chile's most iconic government building, was bombed during the 1973 military coup, killing President Salvador Allende and other occupants. Pinochet's rebuilding of La Moneda and subsequent inhabitation of it was viewed as an affront to the democratic history it had previously represented.

<sup>4</sup> COPACHI, or the Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile, was founded on October 6, 1973, less than one month after the military coup. It was comprised of religious leaders from various faiths and aimed to alleviate the problems confronted by Chileans in the wake of the dictatorship. COPACHI aided foreign nationals to exit the country, provided assistance to women whose husbands were detained by the government and were left unable to support their families, and offered legal help to those detained by the regime. See (Lowden, 1993) for more information.

<sup>5</sup> The Constitution of 1980 was authorized by a plebiscite in which 67% of voters opted to support the constitution. The purpose of the plebiscite was to give the Pinochet regime official legitimacy. Reports of voting fraud were rampant, and several opposition groups boycotted the plebiscite all together (Constable and Valenzuela, 1991: 72).

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the Arpillera movement, see (Moya-Raggio, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Cardinal Fresno, a noted conservative clergyman, was chosen as the replacement for Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez upon his retirement in 1982. His appointment as the new Cardinal was celebrated by the military government, who had openly disliked Cardinal Silva. However, upon ascension to the role of Cardinal, Fresno continued programs such as the Vicaría that Silva had initiated. He was considered a greater hope for negotiating with the regime due to his more moderate, if not conservative beliefs. For more information on the change in leadership, see (*Vicaría de la Solidaridad: Séptimo año de labor 1982*, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Liberation Theology, see (Klaiber, 1968), (Levine, 1988), and (Mainwaring, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Foreign priests were common in Chile and Latin America in this time period. Many self-selected priests from France, Spain, and other European countries traveled to Latin America with the aim of alleviating poverty and assisting in third world development. For more information on the role of foreign priests in Chile and Latin America, see (Löwy, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Opus Dei's relationship with the Pinochet government is somewhat unclear. There is debate as to whether members of the group served as Pinochet's advisors. There is general agreement that the group was sympathetic to the military government. See (Remmer, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the role of liberationist thought in Brazil, see (Mainwaring, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> See (Mignon, 1988) for an in-depth analysis of the role played by the Catholic Church in the Argentinean 'Dirty War.'

<sup>13</sup> For more information on these conferences, see (Poblete, 1979), (Cleary, 1990), and (Sobrino, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> MIR, which stands for Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionaria (Leftist Revolutionary Movement) was a known militant leftist group targeted by Pinochet.

<sup>15</sup> Carlos Camus was the General Secretary of the Chilean Episcopal Conference from 1974-1976.

---

<sup>16</sup> During the military dictatorship, thousands of foreign priests were either deported from or denied entry to Chile. Given this, the fears of COPACHI leaders were justified. In fact, Helmut Frenz himself was not allowed to re-enter Chile after a trip to a Conference to Geneva in 1975 (Lowden, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> The 1980 plebiscite was boycotted by many groups because of the issue of the regime's constitution. To many opposition groups, participating in the plebiscite would mean having to accept its results. They saw the plebiscite as an attempt by Pinochet to consolidate and legitimate his power through rule of law and did not want to have any part in this. For more information see ("Plebiscito 1980").

---

## Bibliography

- Aguilar, Mario I. 2003. "Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, The Catholic Church, and the Pinochet Regime, 1973-1980: Public Responses to a National Security State." *The Catholic Historical Review* 89:4, 712-731.
- Angell, Alan. 1991. "Unions and workers in Chile during the 1980s." in *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile, 1982-1990*. eds. Paul W. Drake and Iván Jaksíc. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Bickford, Louis. 2000. "Human Rights Archives and Research on Historical Memory: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay." *Latin American Research Review* 35:2, 160-182.
- Cancino Troncoso, Hugo. 1997. *Chile: Iglesia y dictadura 1973-1989, Un estudio sobre el rol político de la Iglesia católica y el conflicto con el régimen militar*. Odense: Odense University Press.
- "Chile: Human Rights in Chile: The Role of the Medical Profession." 1986. New York: Amnesty International.
- Cleary, Edward L., O.P., ed. 1990. *Born of the Poor: The Latin American Church Since Medellín*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Comité Permanente del Episcopado. 1983. "Más allá de la protesta." Santiago, 24 June.
- Constable, Pamela and Arturo Valenzuela. 1991. *A Nation of Enemies: Chile under Pinochet*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Donoso, Isabel. 1991. "Human Rights and Popular Organizations." in *Popular Culture in Chile*. eds. Kenneth Aman and Cristián Parker. trans. Terry Cambias. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Drake, Paul W. and Iván Jaksíc. 1991. *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile, 1982-1990*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Figa, Jozef and Hank Johnston. 1988. "The Church and Political Opposition: Comparative Perspectives on Mobilization against Authoritarian Regimes." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27:1 (Mar.): 32-47.
- Fundación de Documentación y Archivos de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad. 1990. "Del Comité Para la Paz a la Vicaría de la Solidaridad: La institucionalización de la defensa de los derechos humanos." *Centro de Documentación* 557, Santiago.
- Fundación de Documentación y Archivos de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad, Departamento Jurídico, various documents. Santiago.

---

Fundación de Documentación y Archivos de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad. "Estado de Emergencia: Declaraciones y Facultades." *Centro de Documentación 771*. Santiago.

Fleet, Michael and Brian H. Smith. 1997. *The Catholic Church and Democracy in Chile and Peru*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Fresno, Juan Francisco. 1985. "Declaración". 29 April Santiago: Arzobispado de Santiago, Departamento de Opinión Pública.

Garretón, Manuel Antonio. 2001. "Popular Mobilization and the Military Regime in Chile: The Complexities of the Invisible Transition." in *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, ed. Susan Eckstein. Berkeley: University of California Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1989. *The Chilean Political Process*. Trans. Sharon Kellum and Gilbert W. Merckx. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Klaiber, Jeffrey L. 1989. "Prophets and Populists: Liberation Theology, 1968-1988." *The Americas* 46:1 (Jul.): 1-15.

Levine, Daniel H. 1988. "Assessing the Impacts of Liberation Theology in Latin America." *The Review of Politics* 50:2 (Spring): 241-263.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1990. "The Catholic Church and Politics in Latin America: Basic Trends and Likely Futures." in *Church and Politics in Latin America*. ed. Dermot Keogh. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Loveman, Brian. 1986-7. "Military Dictatorship and Political Opposition in Chile, 1973-1986." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 28:4 (Winter): 1-38.

Lowden, Pamela. 1993. "The Ecumenical Committee for Peace in Chile (1973-1975): the Foundation of Moral Opposition to Authoritarian Rule in Chile." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 12:2 (May): 189-203.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Moral Opposition to Authoritarian Rule in Chile, 1973-90*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Löwy, Michael. 1996. *The War of the Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*. London: Verso.

Mainwaring, Scott. 1984. "The Catholic Church, Popular Education, and Political Change in Brazil." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 26:1 (Feb.): 97-124.

Mignone, Emilio F. 1988. *Witness to the Truth: The Complicity of Church and Dictatorship in Argentina, 1976-1983*. New York: Orbis Books.

---

Moya-Raggio, Eliana. 1984. ““Arpilleras”: Chilean Culture of Resistance.” *Feminist Studies* 10:2 (Summer): 277-290.

Oxhorn, Philip. 1994. “Where Did All the Protesters Go?: Popular Mobilization and the Transition to Democracy in Chile.” *Latin American Perspectives*, 21:3, Social Movements and Political Change in Latin America: 2. Summer: 49-68.

Parker, Cristián. 1991. “Christianity and Popular Movements in the Twentieth Century.” in *Popular Culture in Chile*. eds. Kenneth Aman and Cristián Parker, trans. Terry Cambias. Boulder: Westview Press.

Poblete, Renato. 1979. “From Medellín to Puebla: Notes for Reflection.” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, Special Issue: The Church and Politics in Latin America* 24:1 (Feb.): 31-44.

Quiroga, Jose, Randy B. Reiter, M.V. Zunzunegui. “Guidelines for Field Reporting of Basic Human Rights Violations.” *Human Rights Quarterly* 8:4 (Nov.): 628-653.

Remmer, Karen L. 1989. *Military Rule in Latin America*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1989. “Neopatrimonialism: The Politics of Military Rule in Chile, 1973-1987.” *Comparative Politics* 21:2 (Jan.): 149-170.

Reyes Álvarez, Francisco. 1999. *El Cardenal: La Batalla del Humanismo Cristiano, Crónicas de un alegato por la democracia*. Santiago: Ediciones Norteman.

Sigmund, Paul E. 1986. “Revolution, Counterrevolution, and the Catholic Church in Chile.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Religion and the State: The Struggle for Legitimacy and Power* 483(Jan.): 25-35.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1987. “The Catholic Tradition and Modern Democracy.” *The Review of Politics* 49:4 (Autumn): 530-548.

Smith, Brian H.. 1982. *The Church and Politics in Chile*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1990. “The Catholic Church and Politics in Chile.” in *Church and Politics in Latin America*. ed. Dermot Keogh. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

Sobrinó, Jon. S.J. 1979. “The Significance of Puebla for the Catholic Church in Latin America.” in *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*. eds. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper. trans. John Drury. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

Vicaría de la Solidaridad, Programa de Formación Cívica. 1987. “Cartillas 1-6”. Santiago.

---

Vicaría de la Solidaridad. 1983. “Casos de Detención Ingresados y Atendidos por la Vicaría de la Solidaridad entre los días 8 y el 13 de septiembre de 1983.” Santiago.

Vicaría de la Solidaridad. 1983. *La Vicaría de la Solidaridad: Séptimo año de labor, 1982.* Santiago.

Vicaría de la Solidaridad. 1984. *La Vicaría de la Solidaridad: Octavo año de labor, 1983.* Santiago.

Vicaría de la Solidaridad. 1987. *La Vicaría de la Solidaridad: Unodécimo año de labor, 1986.* Santiago.