THE FATHER, THE SON, AND SAINT JOSEPH THE WORKER:
THE CHILEAN CHURCH AND ORGANIZED LABOR UNDER PINOCHET

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During various decades, the workers in this country began organizing ourselves, conquering rights and more humane conditions of life. We were achieving just economies and governments with more participation. The workers and the poor majorities were starting to be important subjects in the construction of our society. However, all of this has been snatched from us with violence by the military regime, which through force is imposing a social model that marginalizes and oppresses the majorities. Unemployment, Sainted Father, has brought hunger, misery, anguish, and frustration for thousands and thousands of our families. The right to strike exists only on paper since in practice the managers can by law fire the leaders and all the workers that have participated in a legal strike. Our leaders have known exile, jails, prison camps, relegations, torture and death. We continue fighting in order to reestablish democracy in our country soon. Sainted Father we await you with great affection because you are coming to inspire our noble fight, to inspire our hope.

-Public Letter to Pope John Paul II from Workers in Concepción, Chile, January 1987

In January of 1987, a group of workers from Concepción addressed this public letter to Pope John Paul II. However, this letter was just one among many petitions for help, understanding, and support made by Chilean workers in the months before the Pope’s visit to Chile. As the letter indicates, by 1987, Chile’s working classes had suffered through approximately fourteen years of violent physical, social, and economic repression at the hands of Pinochet’s military regime and its liberal policies. Yet, in spite of all the hardship and injustice, many of the country’s workers remained unified in the hope that their lives and their country would be saved.

Throughout the period of military rule, Chilean workers addressed public letters and declarations to the Church’s top officials, both inside and outside of Chile. The frequency of these communications can be measured according to when they were written. In the years immediately following the 1973 coup, trade unionists and their leaders wrote to Chile’s Archbishop at least once a month but usually more often. These early letters were normally


2The majority of workers’ public letters and declarations reviewed for this projected were found in the “Movimientos sindicales,” box AT38, of the Fundación de Documentación y Archivo de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad. This particular box contains miscellaneous labor documents from the 1970s and 1980s. However, for the most part, these documents are either public declarations or letters written to Church officials. These communications were often joint collaborations between the leaders of the country’s major union federations, such as the National Union of Metalworkers and the National Textile Federation. Though, examples of letters from individual workers and lower level union organizations do exist. Furthermore, the majority of these letters originated in Santiago. However, a few examples written by unions in Concepción, Valparaiso, and northern mining towns do appear in this file.
written in reaction to the regime’s physical repression. Whenever the regime’s security agents arrested union leaders or unrelentingly harassed union members, workers would write a letter to the Archbishop, pleading for his help and intervention in their plight. However, after the regime’s systematic physical repression waned in the late 1970s, these letters and declarations grew less frequent, and they really only appeared after major acts of repression and around important events like the Pope’s visit or May Day.

In these later letters, workers described how their lives had changed and the abhorrent conditions under which they had been living since the military takeover. They explained how the labor movement painstakingly struggled for decades to organize and win both economic and social rights, just to have their achievements crushed when the political tide was turning in their favor. Moreover, they noted the violent physical repression that they and their union leaders had suffered at the military’s hands. These letters also described how the military government’s liberal economic policies, while providing the façade of national prosperity, only provided the working classes with rampant unemployment, hunger, unaffordable health costs, and even less access to education. Finally, they explained how the regime’s new labor code eliminated all of the rights and legal protections—such as collective bargaining and the right to strike—that the labor movement had worked so hard to achieve. Yet, despite all of the hardships revealed in these letters, they usually ended with a guarantee and a plea. The writers always pledged that they had not lost hope and that they would continue to fight for their rights. Furthermore, they always asked for the Church’s help in their plight.

Two questions arise from the numerous letters and public declarations written to Catholic Church officials during the 1970s and 1980s. First, why did Chile’s working classes believe that these men, an Archbishop facing the same repressive regime, and the Pope, who lived thousands of miles away, would help them to solve their problems? The answer to this question lies in the Catholic Church’s progression as a social institution. Workers believed that the Pope and the Archbishop would and could help them because the Catholic Church in Chile had been helping the working classes to survive since the 1950s. In other words, Chilean workers had experienced the Church’s prior support and considered the institution a traditional haven.

By contrast, the second question arising from these letters is more difficult to answer; did the Church act upon workers’ calls to arms by promoting resistance to the regime or was it, as an apolitical institution, simply limited to taking a moral stance against the dictatorship’s human rights violations? As this paper will show, scholars of the military period in Chile have unanimously decided on the latter. However, while not contradicting the interpretation that the Church’s power was limited and unable to overthrow the government, this study will argue that it is necessary to take a more detailed look at the Church’s role in advocating resistance to the regime. More specifically, it will analyze the actions of the employees of the institution’s labor advocacy program, examining how their experiences under the regime affected their consciousness and thus their support of labor resistance. Therefore, through an analysis of the teachings and programs of the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera, this paper will demonstrate that while the scope of the Church’s institutional action against the regime was limited, its employees

3 As has been mentioned earlier, the regime’s new labor code allowed for legal strikes of 60 days. However, the new law also gave managers the right to fire and replace union leaders and workers who were on strike without any repercussions, greatly impeding the influence of a strike.

4 “Carta de los Trabajadores,” 49-51.
were consciously working to rebuild Chilean society by addressing workers’ basic needs and by engaging in political activities in order to promote labor resistance.

In order to accomplish this goal, the study will explore the Church’s first attempts to defend Chileans against the regime by discussing the scholarly literature on the Cooperative Committee for Peace in Chile and the Vicaría de la Solidaridad. After discussing these scholarly works, it will move into an analysis of the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera, its organizational structure, staffing, and programs. To begin, however, the paper will briefly discuss the Chilean Church’s history as a champion of the working classes in order to demonstrate why Chile’s workers were willing to turn to the Church for protection during the 1970s and 1980s.

The Social Action of the Chilean Church

The Church’s role as an opponent to the Pinochet regime has been well documented in the recent historical literature on Chile’s military period. However, the Church’s role of championing the working classes began long before either Allende or Pinochet came to power. According Brian H. Smith, Vatican II legitimized a more “socially active role for Catholicism,” but the truth is that the Chilean Church had begun to shift from its conservative origins to a more social outlook in the 1930s. This shift was motivated by the pastoral letters of certain Chilean bishops who wanted Catholics to take the early social teachings of Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius XI more seriously. Furthermore, in these early years, the country’s more socially conscious priests established Catholic Action programs in an attempt to reconnect the Church with the population’s working-class majority. However, the solidification of this theological shift in Chile came between 1955 and 1964 when fourteen of the country’s bishops retired or died and were replaced by more socially progressive priests. The Chilean Church’s new leadership implemented social programs ranging from work with labor unions to technical training courses for peasants. Moreover, the Church’s new leaders focused on working with the poor, creating low-income housing cooperatives and initiating land reform projects. Thus, it is not surprising that workers stricken by destitution under the dictatorship would turn to the Church and its officials in their time of need.

The Initial Organizational Responses of the Church to Military Rule

Furthermore, it is equally unsurprising that Church officials took steps to protect Chile’s

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6 While these Catholic Action and Young Catholic Worker programs worked in other Latin American countries, the early programs in Chile remained elitist and never directly affected the majority of the country’s workers. However, in the 1950s, these programs were able to teach middle and upper class Chilean youth how to care for the working classes. Brian H. Smith, The Church and Politics in Chile: Challenges to Modern Catholicism, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 95-96 and 114-115. For an example of how Catholic Action programs successfully stimulated the working classes and affected their organization, see Deborah Levenson-Estrada’s Trade Unionists Against Terror: Guatemala City, 1954-1985.
working classes during the period of military rule. Only a few weeks after the military’s coup d’etat, Archbishop and Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez of the Church of Santiago founded the Cooperative Committee for Peace in Chile (COPACHI). This institution was an ecumenical committee comprised of the Catholic Church as well as the Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Orthodox churches of Chile. These denominations put aside their spiritual differences in order to work together to combat the military’s unlimited repression. The primary reason that COPACHI was founded was to assist the families of political prisoners. However, in its two years of existence, the institution established a broad base of foreign funding and created a variety of programs that were able to reach those negatively affected by the new military state. As a religiously-based institution, COPACHI was responsible to all Chileans who were hurt by the military and could not focus solely on helping one group, such as the labor movement. However, in the initial years of the military dictatorship, the institution did provide programs that were fundamental to the survival of the working classes and their unions. For example, union leaders, who were among those targeted for severe repression by the military, were able to use COPACHI’s legal aid office to try to defend their basic human rights. Furthermore, workers benefited from the institution’s Labor Law Department, which provided legal assistance to those fired for political reasons, and they also profited from COPACHI’s aid in finding work for the unemployed. As a religious organization with worldwide support from human-rights organizations, churches, and humanitarian governments, COPACHI was initially able to avoid military repression. However, after two years of service, Pinochet’s government realized that despite the possible international backlash the institution was too threatening to the military regime’s control to let it survive. Therefore, after negative press campaigns, military pressure on the residence permits of Protestant church officials, and a direct order from Pinochet, Silva Henríquez dissolved COPACHI in November of 1975.⁷

The military regime had succeeded in dissolving COPACHI. However, it had not succeeded in quieting the Church’s opposition. Silva Henríquez vowed that the Church and its officials would continue to help the people, and in January of 1976, he founded the Vicaría de la Solidaridad. The Vicaría was created as a branch of the Catholic Church in hopes that the military regime would be more tolerant of the institution’s work against repression. In the beginning, the Vicaría found its most urgent goals to be “to protect the lives of the persecuted, to obtain the freedom of the detained, and to attend to the unemployed that day to day were increasing” in number.⁸

The Vicaría was comprised of three outreach departments—the legal department, the department of zones, and the department of the magazine *Solidaridad*—each of which were responsible for different aspects of the institution’s fight to protect every Chilean’s human rights, especially the right to life.

Much like COPACHI, the Vicaría’s legal department provided the victims of repression and their families with free legal aid. Furthermore, this department strove to protect all personal freedoms by aiding the poor, the exiled, and those persons accused of political crimes. The department of zones was in charge of organizing and coordinating support for the projects

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⁸ “Vicaría de la Solidaridad,” n.d., 1, file CD: 00628.00, FDAVS.
created by the members of each pastoral zone of the Archdiocese. For example, the zones offered educational and training workshops for the unemployed and provided food to public cafeterias for the hungry. Finally, the Vicaría also produced a magazine called *Solidaridad*, which quickly became a popular alternative to the military’s official press. The magazine provided Chileans with reliable and accessible information on repression and social movements. More importantly, however, *Solidaridad* offered those suffering under the military regime the ability to express their feelings, opinions, and opposition to the government. Despite the regime’s repressive acts against priests at all levels of the Church’s hierarchy, the Vicaría de la Solidaridad survived to see Chile return to democracy and through its numerous programs helped countless Chileans, including innumerable workers, reclaim their human rights and survive the dictatorship.  

Thus, from the very start of the military regime in Chile, the Church was involved in helping those people whose human rights were being trampled. However, according to the few articles that have analyzed the Church’s role in the anti-dictatorial movement, the institution did not become a full-fledged political actor in the resistance struggle. Hugo Frühling, whose article evaluates the opposition roles of both COPACHI and the Vicaría, argues that despite the Vicaría’s ability to harass the military government, in reality, its oppositional power was severely limited. By analyzing the Vicaría’s different programs, Frühling demonstrates how the institution was able to create or to regenerate opposition groups that had been destroyed by the military’s repression. He argues that through its human-rights advocacy, the Vicaría was able to persuade supporters of the regime that the military needed to check its repressive tactics. Therefore, by threatening the regime’s support-base, the Vicaría forced Pinochet to open the lines of communication with the newly created opposition groups. However, Frühling also demonstrates that while the Vicaría’s programs caused the military to curb its repression, the institution failed to weaken the overall power of the authoritarian regime. He maintains that the Vicaría’s apolitical nature and its limited resources made it unable to do real harm to the military government. Frühling argues that the fact that the Church was not permitted to work with political parties minimized the Vicaría’s influence on the military government. Furthermore, he contends that the Vicaría’s limited resources caused its programs to remain small and relatively unthreatening to the government’s official power. Thus, despite its relative success in creating a space for opposition, Frühling claims that the Vicaría was unable to truly create an opposition that could stop the regime from consolidating its power over Chilean society.

Likewise, in his study of the Chilean Church’s opposition between 1973 and 1979, Brian H. Smith draws conclusions similar to those of Frühling. In his article, Smith analyzes the extent to which the Church disagreed with the military government and the effectiveness of its strategies to combat repression. He argues that the Chilean Church had little effect on the military government and did not become a successful opposition force for three main reasons. First, he claims that the initial actions of the Church’s hierarchy destroyed its credibility as an opposition force. Primarily, he points to the fact that some Chilean bishops legitimated the military’s repressive takeover in 1974 and 1975. More specifically, he states that these bishops failed to publicly and prophetically denounce the regime until the military had threatened its...
interests. Furthermore, Smith demonstrates that by the time the Church’s top officials decided to denounce the regime, the military had already consolidated its power. Smith also argues that in spite of the fact that Church officials did expand the institution’s roles to perform resistance functions, it did not become a serious threat because the military was able to repress its resistance through harassment, threats, and censorship. Finally, the author explains that the repressive state in Chile led to new participants in the Church, especially among people from the middle and lower-class sectors. This expansion in participation allowed the Church to expand its opposition to the regime. However, Smith argues that the leftist leanings of some of these new participants worked to alienate wealthier and more conservative Catholics. He explains that after their alienation, Chile’s wealthy Catholics decided to remove their financial support from the Church, and he claims that this lack of funding greatly affected the Church’s ability to successfully oppose Pinochet’s military regime. Therefore, despite the Church’s attempts to foment resistance, Smith argues that late denouncements, repression, and the alienation of wealthy Catholics did not allow the Chilean Church to become anything more than an important moral opponent of the regime.\(^\text{11}\)

Finally, Chilean scholar Jaime Ruiz-Tagle touches on the Catholic Church’s role as an opposition movement in his study of trade unionism during the 1970s and 1980s. Ruiz-Tagle’s approach differs slightly from that of both Frühling and Smith since his focus is on the labor movement’s resistance rather than on that of the Church. Nevertheless, despite his slightly different topic, Ruiz-Tagle’s argument that the Church was limited in its ability to help workers resist the regime mirrors that of the other authors. Ruiz-Tagle supports this argument without investigating specific Church advocacy programs and without using evidence generated by the Vicaría. Nevertheless, he does describe how the working classes turned to the Church for help during the initial years of repression, since the political parties had been banned. He argues, however, that while the Church was able to defend workers on the human rights front, its support for workers’ resistance was limited because the institution’s top officials could not permit it to become a class-based party. Therefore, despite its human rights doctrine, Ruiz-Tagle contends that the Church’s self-imposed apolitical nature reduced its ability to oppose the military regime.\(^\text{12}\)

These three authors represent the current scholarly literature on the Chilean Church’s opposition role during the period of military rule. In essence, they all agree that political and economic factors limited the Church’s ability to overthrow Pinochet or to even become a full-blown political actor in the anti-dictatorial struggle. However, while their conclusions are accurate and credible, these authors cannot see relevant political action because they focus on the Church too broadly. In other words, they concentrate on the Church as an all-encompassing institution rather than really looking at its component parts, which demonstrate that while the institution, as a whole, was limited in its political action its lower level employees and the specific social programs that they maintained were not. Therefore, in order to take this discussion to another level, the remainder of this study will focus on the only branch of the Church that was committed solely to Chile’s workers, the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera. More specifically, it will look at the organization’s structure and personnel, illustrating how the

\(^{11}\) Smith, “Old Allies, New Enemies,” 270-303.

experiences of these employees affected their promotion of resistance to the regime. Moreover, the rest of this paper will demonstrate how the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera used faith, educational programs, and its support of clandestine union meetings in its attempts to foment worker resistance.

The Work of the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera

In early 1977, Archbishop Raúl Silva Henríquez along with Cardinals Francisco Fresno and Carlos Oviedo decided to dedicate a branch of the Church solely to the assistance of workers. This decision was made just one year after the founding of the Vicaría de la Solidaridad. Silva Henríquez, Fresno, and Oviedo believed that the Vicaría de la Solidaridad, which was responsible for helping all Chileans in need, was not adequately meeting the needs of the working classes. Thus, in March of 1977, the Archbishop created the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera in an attempt to solve this problem, and according to Chile’s current President, Ricardo Lagos Escobar, who was also a trade unionist who used the organization’s resources during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the “Pastoral Obrera became an open place...where workers felt at home and were able to express themselves without fear and with frankness.”

Much like the Vicaría de la Solidaridad, the Pastoral Obrera was organized hierarchically. Due to the fact that the Pastoral Obrera was a Church organization, ordained priests occupied its top positions. Thus, Archbishop Silva Henríquez headed the entire organization, while a Vicar oversaw the Pastoral Obrera’s day-to-day operations. However, since the Pastoral Obrera was also one of the Church’s social organizations, the majority of its staff was secular. Many of these laypersons had been labor leaders when Pinochet came to power, and as a result of their previous union activism, they had experienced the same defeat and repression that the workers they were trying to help were facing. For example, in a July 2000 interview of Pastoral Obrera employees, Milton Puga, claimed that the story of his entrance into the organization was quite common among the staff. Before joining the organization, Puga had been a union leader in the copper mines of northern Chile. In the early 1970s, he had experienced great success as a union leader. However, after the junta overthrew Allende, he experienced severe repression as a result of his union activism. Furthermore, Puga explained that he was forced by the regime’s security forces to fear for the safety of his family. He related that the regime’s agents made threatening phone calls to his wife and even followed his son as he walked to and from school. Finally, in 1986, he was fired and blacklisted for his union participation, and according to Puga, he turned to the Pastoral Obrera where he has been working for the past fourteen years. Thus, as a result of their time in the labor movement, the Pastoral Obrera’s secular employees were able to approach their work through the lens of their personal experiences with physical repression and economic hardship, which greatly influenced how they worked within the organization to help Chile’s workers.

From the Pastoral Obrera’s inception, its secular employees used their previous experiences as workers and union leaders under the regime to define the organization’s mission.

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13 “Vicaria de la Solidaridad,” n.d., 1, file CD: 00628.00, FAVS.
14 Speech by Ricardo Lagos Escobar, Santiago, Chile, May 1, 2000, 3. A photocopy of this speech was found in the personal collection of Milton Puga.
16 Ibid.
According to Archbishop Raúl Silva Henríquez, he created the Pastoral Obrera in order to help Chile’s workers to fulfill their basic needs and defend their human rights. However, as a result of their previous experiences with repression, the Pastoral Obrera’s secular employees believed that the only way for Chile’s working classes to achieve social justice in the midst of severe military repression was through organization. Thus, these secular staffers redefined the Pastoral Obrera’s mission, assigning the organization the primary role of defending the principles of the labor movement. According to Puga’s memory, the Archbishop created the Pastoral Obrera for the sole purpose of “teaching workers how to unionize.” Thus, from its inception, the Pastoral Obrera and its secular staff took a much more political approach in defending human rights than did other branches of the Chilean Church. The employees of the Pastoral Obrera wanted workers to be able to defend their human rights, especially the right to organize. Therefore, in order to achieve this desire, they supplied workers with access to resources such as television, radio, and print media, which were essential to the labor movement’s reunification but nearly impossible for the working classes to obtain. In addition to these resources, however, the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera openly advocated labor resistance by providing Chile’s working classes with the faith, education, and space that they needed in order to unionize under the regime.

Faith

The first way in which the Pastoral Obrera promoted the idea of worker resistance was to validate it through the Catholic faith. However, this idea of validation was relatively new since Chilean workers’ past resistance had not always enjoyed the favor and support of the Catholic Church. In his article, “En los orígenes del movimiento obrero: El Cristo de los pobres,” Maximiliano Salinas explains that at the time of the labor movement’s birth in the late nineteenth century, an oligarchic Catholicism controlled the Church. In 1893, Mariano Casanova, the Archbishop of Santiago, condemned the new labor movement and its socialism as disruptive of the natural social order established by God. He claimed that the unequal conditions in Chilean society had not been created by man but rather by God and that any attempt to change this natural order was an affront to the Lord and his Church. The oligarchy went so far as to create institutions such as the Sociedad de Obreros de San José to protect its place at the head of Chilean society. These institutions gathered workers and attempted to teach them to accept their unequal fate as Saint Joseph the worker had accepted his plight of suffering. This oligarchic Catholicism never succeeded in destroying the labor movement because workers had redefined Catholicism as a religion of equal love and justice. However, half of the twentieth century passed before the Catholic Church finally stepped away from oligarchic Catholicism and embraced the responsibility of protecting the human and God-given rights of the poor.

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17 “Vicaría de la Solidaridad,” n.d., 1, file CD: 00628.00, FDAVS.
18 Interview with Milton Puga and Pedro Jarra, Santiago, Chile, July 20, 2000.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 According to Brian H. Smith, Vatican II (1962-65) created a more social role for the Church in an attempt to reclaim the influence the institution had lost in certain social sectors. Furthermore, at the Medellín and Puebla Conferences of 1968 and 1979 respectively, the Latin American
After the military regime’s overthrow of the Allende government, the Church’s continued devotion to the poor majorities allowed the Pastoral Obrera to use biblical teachings in its attempt to foment labor resistance in the midst of severe repression. These biblical lessons were usually transmitted to workers at special May Day celebrations and masses planned by the Pastoral Obrera. May Day, the international workers’ holiday, remained an important labor celebration that workers were unwilling to stop celebrating because commemorations of international and national labor events provided them with useful resistance strategies that could be used to better their present situations. Thus, it is not surprising that the former workers and union leaders, who staffed the Pastoral Obrera, also used this holiday to promote labor resistance. Through homilies given at these May Day celebrations, Chile’s Archbishop and bishops working in conjunction with the Pastoral Obrera attempted to teach the Chilean working classes that work was their human right because they were created in the image of God the worker, Jesus, and Saint Joseph the worker. It is difficult to measure the impact that these homilies and their lessons had on the working classes since it is impossible to know how many workers attended these celebrations. However, May Day celebrations and their masses did allow the Pastoral Obrera to communicate its position on the right of workers to resist the military regime.

One lesson that the Pastoral Obrera tried to communicate to Chilean workers was that God loved them and upheld their right to work because He himself had worked to create the world in seven days. Furthermore, the Archbishop and bishops taught workers that work itself was an act sacred to God. Through the creation story, these Church officials explained that God created man to work and maintain the world that He had created. They claimed that God did not only use labor as a punishment for man’s sin but initially created man in his own worker image. Furthermore, Archbishop Silva Henríquez taught workers that “a man prevented from working by someone else’s motives...frustrated the plan of God.” The implication of this lesson was that workers who did not fight for their right to work displeased God by denouncing His image. Therefore, by illustrating God’s devotion to the working classes, the Pastoral Obrera and its leaders provided workers with a biblical reason for resisting Pinochet’s military regime.

Homilies spoken at the Pastoral Obrera’s May Day celebrations also used the image of Saint Joseph of Nazareth to promote the idea of worker resistance. In these lessons, Chile’s workers were taught that God viewed them as the representatives of Saint Joseph, who through sweat and hardship provided for the Virgin Mary and the Son of God. The Church’s leaders believed that by being the representatives of Saint Joseph, Chile’s workers offended Jesus if they allowed themselves or their right to work to be abused. According to Bishop Carlos Camus Larenas, Chilean workers, like Saint Joseph, were obligated to provide for the well being of God’s families. Therefore, if workers were living in a society that impaired their ability to take

church further interpreted Vatican II to mean that it had an obligation to champion the needs of the poor. Smith, “Old Allies, New Enemies,” 270.

23 These May Day homilies were also compiled into booklets and distributed by the Archdiocese of Santiago. However, without distribution data, it is still difficult to measure how many and what type of workers were impacted by these teachings.

care of their families through unemployment or harsh social conditions, they were obligated by God to fight for and through work. The invocation of Saint Joseph’s image on May Day began on May 1, 1967 when Pope Pío XII first combined the “fiesta de San José Obrero” with the international day of the worker. Thus, the comparison that Chilean priests made between the nation’s workers and Saint Joseph was not a new interpretation being made only to promote worker resistance but rather a legitimate and traditional theological dictum.

Archbishop Raúl Silva Henríquez also used the Pastoral Obrera’s May Day celebrations to teach workers that Jesus, as the son of a poor carpenter, had lived the life of a worker until he began his life of evangelism. Furthermore, when he went out into the world to teach, the Archbishop argued, the first men that He chose to help build his Church were working as fishermen. Silva Henríquez even explained that after Jesus had been recognized as the Son of God and had gathered a following He continued to labor with his hands, refusing to let anyone wait on Him or place Him above his believers. According to the Archbishop, “workers recognized Jesus without difficulty and like one of their own [because] he spoke their language, interpreted their longings, and shared their load.” Thus, by equating workers with the image of Saint Joseph and Jesus, the founder of their Church and their Salvation, Catholic officials reiterated the importance of workers’ toils and argued that the working classes had an obligation to protect their right to work through resistance.

Finally, the Pastoral Obrera championed worker resistance by defying the military regime and openly advocating the human rights of Chilean workers. Again, through May Day homilies, the Church hierarchy defined the rights of workers according to the Bible and demanded that the working classes fight if the military refused to reinstate those rights. The Chilean Church did not favor one right over the other because “when a person’s dignity is abused by the violation of his or her rights, it is the entire human being that is affected.” However, the employees of Chile’s Pastoral Obrera most commonly advocated the right to a fair salary and the right to organize. The bishops speaking at the Pastoral Obrera’s May Day celebrations taught that eating was as important as breathing was to the right of life. Therefore, they denounced the military’s liberal economic policies for failing to supply workers with the salaries needed to feed themselves and their families. On May 1, 1986, Bishop Camus Larenas declared that salaries “should be just and sufficient for life,” that “the salary of a worker cannot be considered independently from his human necessities,” and that “the right to life cannot depend on supply and demand nor on economic theories.” The Pastoral Obrera also defended the working classes’ right to organize. Church officials taught workers that in the face of powerful and dominating forces that chose to victimize them, their only defense against the destruction of their human rights was their unity. Bishop Larenas quoted Pope John Paul II’s statement that new solidarity movements were

25 Bishop Carlos Camus Larenas, La Dignidad del Trabajo: Homilia del Obispo Carlos Camus Larenas, 1 of May 1986, (Linares: Departamento de Laicos, 1986), 2-4, file CD:00628.00, FDAVS.
27 Ibid.
29 Bishop Carlos Camus Larenas, La Dignidad del Trabajo: Homilia del Obispo Carlos Camus Larenas, 1 of May 1986, (Linares: Departamento de Laicos, 1986), 5, file CD:00628.00, FDAVS.
always necessary in the fight for social justice. Furthermore, Archbishop Silva Henríquez went
so far as to champion the right to strike because the Chilean working class deserved to have and
“make its voice heard freely.” He believed that when Chile’s working classes were faced with
unemployment, hunger, homelessness, and repression, they should organize and resist in order to
uphold their right to life. Thus, during the period of military rule, the Pastoral Obrera and its
leaders used May Day celebrations as a forum in which to teach workers that they were the
representatives of God, Jesus, and Saint Joseph the Worker and furthermore to demand that
workers fight for their rights.

Education

Outside of May Day celebrations, the Pastoral Obrera also used a number of different
educational services in order to promote the idea of labor resistance in Chile. Among these
services, the most popular and most useful seem to have been the institution’s summer school
sessions and its educational pamphlet series. In January of 1980, the Pastoral Obrera held its
first Escuela de Verano with eighty students in attendance. The Pastoral Obrera founded the
summer school in order to unify Chilean workers, young, old, men, and women, in the task of
finding a solution for the “human destruction” that was victimizing them. At the summer
school’s inception, the Pastoral Obrera was targeting people who had absolutely no access to
unionization in their everyday lives, offering them classes designed to teach the fundamentals of
creating and maintaining a union. However, as the summer school became an annual event,
drawing crowds of up to 1400 people, the institution began to offer courses in a variety of topic
areas. For example, at the third annual summer school, held in the working-class barrio of
Puente Alto, the Pastoral Obrera offered numerous classes in the areas of trade unionism,
communication and culture, and religious studies. After the first couple of years, the summer
schools, which were often held in a local school building and which usually lasted ten days, also
began to attract workers from all over Chile as well as from the other countries of the Southern
Cone.

The Pastoral Obrera was attempting to complete two main objectives through the summer
schools. First, the institution was trying to raise the education level of the working masses. The

30 Ibid., 6.
31 Archbishop Raúl Silva Henríquez, “Jesús el hijo del carpintero,” in Homilias Oficiales de la
Iglesia de Santiago Pronunciadas con Fecha 1 de Mayo, Fiesta de San Jose Obrero, 1974 a
1978, (Santiago: Archdiocese of Santiago, 1978), 22, file CD:00628.00, FDAVS. The
Archbishop pronounced this particular homily on May 1, 1976. Silva Henríquez also touches on
the importance of the right to a fair salary in this homily, 21.
32 Ibid.
33 “IV Escuela de Verano: Una Luz de Esperanza,” Dialogando, 64 (January 1983), 4-5. All
issues of the Pastoral Obrera’s newspaper Dialogando used in this paper were found in the
private collection of Pedro Jarra.
35 Interview with Milton Puga and Pedro Jarra, Santiago, Chile, June 20, 2000.
36 “Third Escuela de Verano: Decanato Pte. Alto,” 2-3, Organizaciones Sociales Iglesia, Box 4,
ANSXX.
Pastoral Obrera offered numerous courses on union organization; however, it also offered a number of different courses, such as communication, that taught the students new skills, making them more competitive on the job market. Along these same lines, the summer schools also offered courses that educated workers about how to better their current living situations. For example, the sixth annual summer school offered courses on health, hygiene, and alcoholism. These particular courses did not teach workers unionization skills. Nonetheless, they were important because, like previous Church programs, they taught workers how to avoid and/or fix personal problems that would only be exacerbated by the repressive situation in which they were living. The second and most important goal of the Pastoral Obrera was to meet the organizational needs of Chile’s working classes. The schools offered a wide array of classes on unionization and leadership, which attempted to teach workers the importance of unions as well as how to create them. However, the classes on trade unionism alone did not fulfill the working classes’ organizational needs. The Pastoral Obrera founded the summer schools in order to educate, but it also wanted to provide a space in which workers could exchange experiences and help each other to continue hoping. Thus, by providing unionization classes and a space in which to meet, the Pastoral Obrera used its summer school program to campaign for workers’ resistance of the military regime.

In the 1980s, the Pastoral Obrera also began to publish educational pamphlets, which it used in its attempt to spark labor resistance to the regime. The organization’s employees provided union leaders and other members of the working classes with these pamphlets, hoping that they would be read and discussed in the factories, churches, and homes of workers. By 1982, the Pastoral Obrera had created six pamphlet series, including a labor, economics, and theological series. Throughout the year, the Pastoral Obrera hosted some weekend seminars about unionization, which workers were able to attend. However, the institution’s pamphlet series was the primary resource used to educate the working classes about resistance in the months between the summer schools.

The pamphlet collection that the Pastoral Obrera created attempted to spark worker resistance both through its design and through its content. These pamphlets were created for use in a group setting. Each pamphlet was designed so that a list of group activities and reflections followed the main presentation. For example, in the pamphlet entitled “Sistema Político y actividad Política,” the reader is told to “organize into groups of three or four with fellow workers, neighbors, friends, or relatives for a small reflection about the contents of this pamphlet.” Therefore, through their design, the Pastoral Obrera’s pamphlets were meant to

39 “Third Escuela de Verano: Decanato Pte. Alto,” 1, Organizaciones Sociales Iglesia, Box 4, ANSXX.
41 “Construir la Esperanza. . .Tarea de Todos,” Civic Formation Pamphlet Series 1-7, October 1987, file CD:PPNAC, FDAVS. Since the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera does not have an archive and has not saved any of its educational materials from the period of the military regime, the analysis of the institution’s pamphlet program is based on one surviving series of pamphlets and one newspaper article. However, according to Milton Puga and Pedro Jarra, the surviving series is very representative of the entire program.
42 “Construir la Esperanza. . .Tarea de Todos: Sistema Político y actividad Política,” 1 (October 1987), 14, file CD:PPNAC, FDAVS.
help initiate communication among workers, which the Pastoral Obrera’s employees hoped would spark resistance within Chile’s working classes.

The specific subject of each pamphlet varied. However, each edition followed the same organizational style. The pamphlets begin with a description of how the regime has repressed a Chilean institution. Furthermore, after this description of repression, they provide their readers with an explanation of what his/her rights would be in the same situation. Finally, each pamphlet ends by providing the reader with a plan on how to deal with or halt repression. For example, in “Ley de Partidos Políticos,” the writer first discusses the repressed state of political parties in Pinochet’s Chile and later explains the reader’s right to organize an opposition party and also how to accomplish that organization. Most of the pamphlets advocate creating organizations through which workers can fight for their right not to be repressed. Therefore, by explaining injustices to the reader and by showing workers how to fix the problem, the Pastoral Obrera hoped to demonstrate to workers that they could and should fight the military government’s repression.

Space

Finally, the Pastoral Obrera attempted to open up a space for working-class opposition by providing workers with places to meet. Immediately following the coup, the junta passed Decree Law 198, placing severe restrictions on every type of public gathering, including union meetings. By the time the Pastoral Obrera became active in 1977, little had changed regarding unions’ abilities to hold meetings. More specifically, unions were still being forced to ask the junta’s permission to meet. Furthermore, trade unionists were still restricted from discussing topics like strikes and workers’ rights at these officially-sanctioned meetings. However, the Pastoral Obrera defied the regime and hosted union meetings wherever its employees could find space. As was stated previously, the Pastoral Obrera worked to uphold the working classes’ right to organize. However, in order to plan and organize, workers had to have safe places to meet, which the Pastoral Obrera attempted to provide. According to employee, Milton Puga, “the Pastoral Obrera worked under the umbrella of the Church to protect workers and their organizations from the dictatorship’s repression.”

Through the Pastoral Obrera, unions and other organizations obtained the right to use churches and chapels to host their meetings. The Church believed that Catholic churches and chapels were special and sacred places that were meant for the celebration of faith, but officials and parishioners also felt that the Christian chapel should, like God’s house, remain open to all groups and activities. However, in order to gain the right to use a church or chapel, unions had to make agreements with the communities that worshipped in the particular church. For example, the Christian Community of Malaquías Concha in the southern zone of Santiago agreed to allow unions to use their chapel as a meeting area. However, the community insisted on making an agreement in which it promised to refrain from intervening in the group’s activities and from trying to influence the organization’s political stance, as long as the visiting group

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43 “Construir la Esperanza. . .Tarea de Todos: Ley de partidos politicos,” 6 (October 1987), 1-14, file CD:PPNAC, FDAVS.
44 Interview with Milton Puga and Pedro Jarra, Santiago, Chile, July 20, 2000.
agreed not to make the chapel the headquarters of politically supported activities. Therefore, by providing unions and other organizations with places to meet away from the military’s repressive eye, the Pastoral Obrera hoped to bolster the Chilean opposition movement.

The Pastoral Obrera believed so strongly in workers’ right to organize that it allowed unions to hold meetings in its office area. The mostly secular staff knew that they were risking danger by supporting the labor movement. However, many of them had at one time or another been either union leaders or involved union members. These employees had celebrated victories with the labor movement, and many of them had felt the swift hand of military repression after Allende’s overthrow. Yet, their personal and collective experiences as workers and union members had taught them that the labor movement’s survival was the key to the survival of the Chilean working classes. Therefore, these staffers risked their freedom and their lives to provide the labor movement with the space it needed to reorganize and survive. According to President Ricardo Lagos, the sacrifice made by the Pastoral Obrera staff was not in vain, since it provided Manuel Bustos with the roof he needed to “reconstruct the labor movement in Chile.”

In his 2000 May Day speech, the president explained that Bustos was only able to establish the Central Unica de Trabajadores (CUT), which played an important role in the regime’s downfall, because the Pastoral Obrera staff had provided the union leader with a place to work, people with which to discuss labor organization, and the resources with which to accomplish his task. Thus, the Pastoral Obrera’s ability to provide unions with a space in which to organize and with educational programs took the organization one step closer to the resistance movement it was attempting to initiate.

Conclusions

During the 1970s and 1980s, workers frequently turned to the Catholic Church for support against the repression in their everyday lives. Theological shifts in the 1950s and 1960s had led the Chilean Church to focus more on the needs of Chile’s working classes. As a result of this shift, the Church and its social programs had become a traditional haven for Chilean workers by the time the military junta usurped power. Thus, workers flocked to the institution for support. In response to workers’ needs, Archbishop Raúl Silva Henríquez established the Vicaría de la Solidaridad in order to defend the human rights of the Chilean working classes.

Historians and scholars have recently begun debating whether or not the Vicaría de la Solidaridad played an integral part of the opposition to Pinochet’s military government. Thus far, these scholars have argued that despite its clear moral stand, political and economic factors limited the Church’s ability to become a full-fledged political actor in the anti-dictatorial struggle. However, this paper has demonstrated that while this interpretation is largely accurate, a closer examination of the Church’s social organizations uncovers relevant political action.

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46 Ibid. This particular church community, named after the early twentieth-century socialist legislator Malaquías Concha, believed that “closed groups” like political parties would inhibit their ability to serve all people in their church. Thus, they decided that politically exclusive groups would not be permitted to use their holy space.


48 Speech by Ricardo Lagos Escobar, Santiago, Chile, May 1, 2000, 3. A photocopy of this speech was found in the personal collection of Milton Puga.

49 Ibid., 2-3.
against the regime in the institution’s lower levels. Thus, by focusing on the Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera, this study has shown that the experiences of its employees influenced their promotion of labor resistance to the regime. Specifically, the repression that they had faced as trade unionists in the initial years of the regime affected how these employees carried out the mission of the Pastoral Obrera, in essence making it a much more political organization than other branches of the Church.

As a result of their experiences with physical repression and economic hardship, the staff of the Pastoral Obrera openly championed workers’ resistance to the regime. They used biblical teachings that equated Chile’s workers with God, Jesus, and Saint Joseph the Worker in order to demonstrate to laborers that their work was sacred and deserved to be defended. Furthermore, these employees used educational programs and clandestine meetings in order to advocate labor resistance in Chile. It is difficult to measure the extent to which these teachings and programs impacted the working classes. However, union pamphlets and circulars from the period demonstrate that labor leaders perceived the organization’s work to be important and useful to their cause.

In 1988, Juan Contreras Molina, president of Santiago’s Sindicato de Tracción, explained that the members of his union attended May Day masses in order to acknowledge the help and support that the Church had given workers during the period of military rule. However, union leaders did more than acknowledge the help that the Pastoral Obrera gave them; they openly and actively supported the organization’s attempts to promote labor organization. For example, numerous union circulars carried advertisements for the Pastoral Obrera’s summer schools, and union writers urged workers to attend the courses and to learn the importance of labor organization. Furthermore, some union activists even participated as leaders in the Pastoral Obrera’s programs. For example, in 1987, Manuel Bustos taught a class on the history of Chile’s labor movement at the Pastoral Obrera’s ninth summer school. Thus, through their experiences with physical repression and economic hardship, the employees of the Pastoral Obrera were able to promote organizational programs that some labor leaders found to be in tune with their own goals, and together Church and union personnel were able to advocate labor organization and workers’ resistance to the military regime.

51 El Coordinador, 5 (December 1984), 8-9, Organizaciones Sociales Sindical, Box 8, ANSXX, and El Territorial, (December 1981), 3, Organizaciones Sociales Sindical, Box 5, ANSXX.
52 “IX Jornadas Sociales de la Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera,” El Coordinador, 41 (December 1987-January 1988), 6-8, Organizaciones Sociales Sindical, Box 8, ANSXX.
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