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SILENCING REBELLIOUS PRIESTS: *Rodolfo Escamilla García and the Repression of Progressive Catholicism in Cold-War Mexico*

ABSTRACT: This article examines the silencing and repression of rebellious priests in Mexico from the 1940s to the mid 1970s and places the divergent actors that composed the Catholic Church during this period as key players in the Cold War. It examines the web of personal and organizational connections of a single emblematic individual whose transnational history has been mostly absent from the accounts of the era: the Jesuit priest Rodolfo Escamilla García. Founder of the Catholic Workers' Youth (JOC) in the late 1950s, he championed the radical "See, Judge, Act" method that politicized thousands of people across Latin America during the 1960s, when liberation theology emerged throughout the continent and competing conservative authorities came together to repress it. In 1977 Escamilla García was brutally killed in Mexico City, likely with the approval of government security agencies. Yet, his brutal killing, and the murders and torture of other priests examined in this article, were never investigated by police authorities. Further, their silencing points to a moment in Mexican history when government leaders and iconic leftist intellectuals erroneously championed the idea that the nation was exceptional in the Latin American region, meaning less authoritarian and more democratic. The most influential ecclesiastical authorities overwhelmingly agreed. For them, maintaining a productive relationship with the state took precedence over the need to publicly condemn the assassination of rebellious priests. Instead, the loudest voices of condemnation came from progressive Catholics representing the Mexican Social Secretariat (SSM) and the National Center of Social Communications (CENCOS).

KEYWORDS: Progressive Catholicism, Cold War, State Repression, and 1968 Mexico

My friend, a university professor, was left naked, hanging upside down. His body endured hours of beatings and electric shocks . . .

All too often the victims were tortured until they [stopped breathing]. Their bodies were often left without fingernails. [Others] were violently mutilated while their eyes were removed from their sockets. Such was the case of Juan LUCAS ALVES from Rio de Janeiro.

One of my dear friends, HENRIQUE, a student chaplain at Recife . . . [suffered a similar crime]. He was first dishonored, then violently mutilated, and then left hanging in a public [space].

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This was the testimony of a tortured priest who witnessed the atrocities committed by Brazilian authorities during the 1960s and 1970s.[1] According to one study, the number of victims of state violence who were affiliated with the church swelled across Latin America during this period, reaching as many as "850 priests, nuns, and bishops arrested, tortured, and then murdered."[2] One of the most renowned cases was Fr. Antônio Henrique Pereira Netto whose disfigured body was found hanging from a tree on the campus of the University of Recife on May 26, 1969. The 28-year-old priest was the secretary of youth affairs for Bishop Hélder Câmara.[3]

Mexico did not witness dozens of killings of priests. But the governing authorities certainly relied on terror to silence those who questioned the authoritarian regime of the PRI (Institutionalized Revolutionary Party), including progressive Catholics who sided with the young activists of the era and simultaneously faced one of the most conservative churches on the continent. In making this argument, I examine the web of personal and organizational connections of a single emblematic individual whose history has been mostly absent from the accounts of the Cold War period: the Jesuit priest Rodolfo Escamilla García.

At the end of the 1950s, Escamilla García founded the Juventud Obrera Católica (Catholic Workers' Youth, JOC) and championed the radical "See, Judge, Act" method of public action. Also widely known across the world as the *revisión de vida* (revision of life), this method was a form of socioreligious activism with roots in 1920s France that politicized dozens of young Catholics in Mexico before and after the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968. In 1977, Escamilla was brutally killed in Mexico City, likely with the approval of government security agencies. A public investigation of his murder never took place. Worse yet, with the exception of a few isolated Catholic figures, also featured here, the most influential ecclesiastical authorities failed to articulate a strong condemnation of his killing or to refute the allegations published in the press that Escamilla was murdered by a deranged leftist student.

The violent end to Escamilla's life was not an isolated phenomenon, and his brutal killing must be understood in the broader context of the 1970s, when government

1. "Carta de un sacerdote deportado," *SPES* 1:2 (October 1969): 8–9.

2. David Kunzle, *Chesucristo: The Fusion in Image and Word of Che Guevara and Jesus Christ* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 68. Many of these martyrs are listed in Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People: United States Involvement in the Rise of Fascism, Torture, and Murder and the Persecution of the Catholic Church in Latin America* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1980), 463–469.

3. "Ante el asesinato del P. Henrique Pereira Netto," *SPES* 1:1 (September 1969): 6–7; "El martirio de Henrique," *SPES* 1:2 (October 1969): 5; Carlos Gradín, "Ante el asesinato del P. Henrique," *Víspera* 3:11 (July 1969): 21–24. See also James N. Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 108–110.

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authorities, iconic leftist intellectuals, and scholars championed the idea that Mexico was exceptional in the region, meaning less authoritarian and more democratic. But as a new generation of historians has recently argued, this was far from the truth. Torture, forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, illegal mechanisms of control, and blatant violations of human rights often went hand in hand with the democratic opening championed by Luis Echeverría (1970-76) and continued during the populist administration of his successor, José López Portillo (1976-82).[4] These years coincided with the rise and repression of liberation theology in the broader Latin American region, reaching a high point of contention during the 1979 Latin American Bishops Conference in Puebla, when Pope John Paul II paved the conservative path that thereafter undermined the radicalism of an earlier era. By 1966, the CIA had already described the Latin American Church as a "Marxist Church."[5]

Six years later, the Colombian Adolfo López Trujillo was appointed general secretary of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), a position he held with an authoritarian hand until 1984. During his tenure, he launched a counteroffensive against progressive Catholics.[6] In Mexico, the direct weight of López Trujillo's presence was perhaps minimal, as national figures too relied on powerful ecclesiastical authorities who opposed the perceived radicalism of the Latin American Church. As I argue in this article, they said little to protest against the repression of priests at home, largely in fear of jeopardizing the *modus vivendi* that had solidified the collaborative relationship between ecclesiastical and government authorities since the 1940s.[7]

In 1977, the year Escamilla was killed, Mexico also witnessed the brutal murder of Rodolfo Aguilar Álvarez, a young priest from Chihuahua who lent his support to a group of forcibly displaced campesinos. Five years earlier, the Marist priests Oscar Núñez and Rafael Reygadas were tortured by agents of the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Federal Security Directorate, DFS), the nation's

4. See for example the collection of essays in Jaime M. Pensado and Enrique C. Ochoa, eds., *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression During the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018).

5. Kevin Devlin, "The Catholic-Communist 'Dialogue,'" *Problems of Communism,* May-June 1966, Central Intelligence Agency digital library, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78-03061a000400010030-5, accessed November 6, 2021.

6. Lernoux, *Cry of the People*, 409–448; Craig L. Nessan, *The Vitality of Liberation Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 43–48.

7. In making this argument, I expand on the pioneering work published by Patricia Arias, Alfonso Castillo, and Cecilia López, *Radiografía de la iglesia católica en México, 1970–1978* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1981), 53–61.

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intelligence agency created in 1947 and transformed into a violent tool of repression during the 1960s and 1970s.[8]

The repression of rebellious priests provides us with a window into some of the most turbulent years of the Cold War in Mexico from the contentious perspectives of a deeply divided Church, whose hierarchy saw the most radical elements of liberation theology, and the Left more generally, as a foreign threat to the Catholic nation. What Escamilla, Aguilar, Núñez, and Reygadas had in common with other priests violently repressed in Latin America, I argue, was their affiliation with radical youth and their relentless questioning of the most traditional practices of the Church. For the most prominent leaders of the Church, maintaining a diplomatic relationship with the state took precedence over the need to publicly condemn the assassination of progressive priests.

With a few exceptions, mostly written in Spanish, the scholarship of the Cold War in Mexico has paid little attention to religion and the divergent expressions of Catholicism that emerged during this period. In this article, I draw attention to the silencing and repression of priests who broke with the status quo, including key figures of the JOC. This was a transnational movement with national links to two influential institutions that successfully declared their autonomy from the Church in the late 1960s, the Secretariado Social Mexicano (Mexican Social Secretariat, SSM) and the Centro Nacional de Comunicación Social (National Center of Social Communications, CENCOS).

I draw extensively from a long interview that I had with the progressive Jesuit priest Jesús García, co-founder of the JOC, leader of the SSM, and friend of Escamilla.[9] I place this conversation and others held with figures sympathetic to the revisión de vida method in relation to a broad range of ecclesiastical archival sources.[10] These sources have been largely ignored by historians of the

8. Gladys I. McCormick, "Torture and the Making of a Subversive During Mexico's Dirty War," in Pensado and Ochoa, eds., *México Beyond 1968*, 254–272.

9. The other four people I interviewed are Fr. Manuel Velázquez, director of the Secretariado Social Mexicano (SSM); the Dominican friar Miguel Concha, key leader of the human rights movement in Mexico; Laudelino Cuetos, Spanish Dominican friar and director of the Centro Universitario Cultural (CUC) in the 1970s; and Rafael Reygadas, former Marist priest and leading member of Sacerdotes para el Pueblo (SPP).

10. Based on real events, their self-representations of the past are often richer in detail than written documents. If read against the grain of the printed sources, they allow the historian to give voice to those who have been overshadowed in a scholarship that has overwhelmingly prioritized a secular perspective of the Cold War period. Most of my written sources come from four archives: the Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México [hereafter AHAM]; the Archivo del Secretariado Mexicano [hereafter ASSM]; the Archivo de la Acción Católica Mexicana in Mexico City [hereafter AACM]; and the Archivo del Secretariado Latinoamericano, Fondo Leonidas Proaño in Quito, Ecuador [hereafter ASLA-FLP].

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Cold War, who have instead overwhelmingly relied on government surveillance documents and secular leftist manifestos.[11]

THE SILENCING OF PRIESTS AND THE PERCEIVED THREAT OF *JOCISMO*

Born in the small town of Maravatío, Michoacán in 1920, Rodolfo Escamilla García was brought up in a modest lower-middle-class family.[12] His parents were devout Catholics who worked in the textile industry and introduced the young Rodolfo and his ten siblings to the charity projects of the Church. In the 1930s, the parents expressed dissatisfaction with the socialist education platform of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), but they welcomed his labor politics. In 1935, their son Rodolfo decided to follow the example of his three uncles and became a priest. He boarded a train to the United States to enroll at the Montezuma Seminary, an institute established in New Mexico by American Jesuits during the Cristero Rebellion (1926-29) for the education of Mexican priests. He studied theology there and organized a study group to discuss the contemporary politics of Mexico and the United States. In September 1944, Escamilla was ordained as a Jesuit priest. Soon after, he completed his education in Social Sciences and became interested in "cooperativism," a developmentalist movement with roots in Canada during the 1920s, which promoted social justice, transparency, cooperation, and economic independence through association.[13]

Alliance with the Secretariado Social Mexicano and Commitment to the See, Judge, Act Method

In 1946, Escamilla gave his first homilies in the small towns of Tlalpujahua and Zacapu, in his native state of Michoacán. During the six years that he lived there,

11. Important exceptions incorporated in this article include Arias et al., *Radiografía de la iglesia;* Roberto Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia católica en México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992); Raquel Pastor Escobar, "Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano. José Álvarez Icaza y la puesta en práctica del Concilio Ecuménico" (PhD diss.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004; Ariana Quezada, "The Revolution in Crisis: A History of Human Rights in Mexico, 1970–1980" (PhD diss.: University of Oklahoma, 2016; José Israel Zárate Ortiz, "Las acciones y la represión de la Iglesia de los pobres en la diócesis de León, 1959–1969" (BA thesis, Universidad de Guanajuato, 2017); and Jesús García, "La Iglesia Mexicana desde 1962," *Historia general de la Iglesia en América Latina, Tomo V* (Mexico City: Ediciones Paulinas, 1984), 361–493.

12. Unless otherwise noted, I have relied on the following sources for this short biography: Jesús García, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 7, 2016; García, "La Iglesia Mexicana desde 1962"; Manuel Velázquez H., interview with the author, Mexico City, June 18, 2012; Manuel Velázquez H., *Pedro Velázquez H., apóstol de la justicia. Vida y pensamiento* (Mexico City: Secretariado Social Mexicano, 1978); José Aparecido Gomes Moreira, "Para una historia de la Juventud Obrera Católica (1969–1985)," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 49:3 (July-September 1987): 205–220; and Moisés Alejandro Quiroz Mendoza, "Memoria, identidad y participación de los jóvenes de la Cooperativa de Vivienda Palo Alto, Ciudad de Mexico" (MA thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Azcapotzalco, 2019).

13. Velázquez H., *Pedro Velázquez H.*, 49*;* Terence J. Fay, *A History of Canadian Catholics: Gallicanism, Romanism, and Canadianism* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2002), 209–211.

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he assisted mine workers in petitioning for higher wages and better working conditions. He also advised factory workers and campesinos and assisted them in their efforts to organize independent unions. He led study groups that used the Bible to promote adult literacy, and with the support of the priest and influential member of the SSM, Pedro Velázquez, Escamilla traveled to Canada to attend workshops on cooperativism at the universities of Laval in Quebec and St. Francis Xavier in Nova Scotia. Some of Escamilla's acquaintances called him "the teacher"; others referred to him as the "sociologist." But for the ruling elite of Zacapu, the priest's involvement with peasant and worker organizations made him a political nuisance and a threat to their economic power. In collaboration with local figures in Michoacán, they organized several campaigns against him. In 1952, they lobbied the ecclesiastical authorities to relocate him to a different parish. By order of the bishop of Morelia, Salvador Martínez Silva, Escamilla was sent to a parish in León (Guanajuato) and asked to refrain from political activity.

Escamilla did not last long in the conservative city of León. For a few months there, he remained in contact with local activists and progressive leaders from the parish of Zacapu. Then, at the insistence of Pedro Velázquez, he moved to Mexico City, where he became a devoted member of the SSM. Founded by the Episcopate in 1922, the original purpose of the Secretariado was to coordinate all institutions and projects promoting the social work of the Church. By the late 1930s, however, it had lost its social mission and become an evangelical tool for the Acción Católica Mexicana (Mexican Catholic Action, ACM), mostly involved in the spiritual work of the Church.[14] This changed in 1941 when Pedro Velázquez became a member of the SSM and pressured the episcopate to provide the organization with greater autonomy from the ACM. In the next few years, Velázquez played a profound role in energizing the bases of the Secretariado, in strengthening its presence across the nation, and in providing Escamilla with a bigger platform in leading the creation of the JOC in the mid to late 1950s.[15]

The interest of Velázquez in the JOC dated back to his education in Europe. In 1925, at the age of 13, he enrolled at the Conciliar Seminar of the Diocese of Mexico where he excelled as a student. Seven years later, he received a scholarship to attend the Gregorian University in Rome, where he translated

14. Pedro Velázquez, "La iglesia presente en la vida social," *Comentarios* (Madrid: Ediciones Pax Romana, 1949), 61–71, in ASLA-FLP, Fondo Pax Romana, Secretariado Latinoamericano. See also María Luisa Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política de los católicos mexicanos* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2013); and Stephen J. C. Andes, "A Catholic Alternative to Revolution: The Survival of Social Catholicism in Postrevolutionary Mexico," *The Americas* 68:4 (April 2012): 529–562.

15. Velázquez, interview with the author.

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his first texts to Spanish. In 1939, he earned a doctoral degree and met Joseph Cardijn, the Belgian worker priest who founded the Young Christian Workers movement. Six years his senior, Cardijn introduced Velázquez to the JOC's revisión de vida method, which eventually influenced the most iconic documents written during the Second Vatican Council and the 1968 Medellín Conference.[16] First popularized in France by Cardijn in the 1920s, this method consisted of a three-stage process of organizing (See, Judge, Act) that effectively evangelized non-practicing Catholics and provided workers with an opportunity to improve their lives, raise their consciousness in relation to their labor, and make the Catholic faith relevant to their everyday world.

Those who embraced the revisión de vida method were first asked to "see" the conditions and injustices around them. Then, they were required to "judge" those conditions by asking themselves how God might call on them to respond, based on their readings of the Scriptures and the social teachings of the Church. Finally, once they had developed a better understanding of their surroundings and the specific circumstances of their lives, they were asked to "act" and thus become faithful and effective agents of substantial change.[17] Hoping to learn more about this method, Velázquez traveled to the north of France, where he intended to enroll at the Workers' Missionary School in Lille. However, the outbreak of World War II forced him to return to Mexico, where he began his work with the ACM, as the central advisor to the Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana (Mexican Catholic Feminine Youth, JCFM), in 1941. That same year, he joined the Secretariado, hoping to popularize the JOC method in his native country. But the director of the SSM, Rafael Dávila Vilchis, and the ACM leadership saw *jocismo* with suspicion and as likely to harm Church-state relations, which had improved significantly during the 1940s when President Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-46) embraced reconciliation with ecclesiastical authorities, allowed the Church to hold massive religious celebrations, and abolished the controversial socialist provisions from the 1917 constitution.[18]

For three years, Velázquez served as a loyal supporter of the ACM mission and encouraged its authorities to give autonomy to the SSM. His commitment paid off. In 1944, the Mexican episcopate approved the Secretariado's separation from the ACM, and four years later, Velázquez was named its new

16. Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican I: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 126; Luis G. del Valle, S.J, *Primero ser hermanos, luego todos los demás* (Mexico City: Centro de Reflexión Teológica, 2008), 238.

17. García and Velázquez H., interviews with the author; Del Valle, S.J., *Primero ser hermanos,* 237–240.

18. Velázquez H., *Pedro Velázquez H.,* 44–45; Roderic Ai Camp, *Crossing Swords: Politics and Religion in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28.

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director. He immediately put together a team that agreed with his goals of fostering cooperatives and mutual aid societies, training promoters of social work to travel to these local communities, and creating JOC chapters in large industrialized cities to address the needs and improve the living conditions of the working class. Besides Escamilla, this group of JOC supporters included Fr. Manuel Velázquez (Pedro's older brother) and Carlos Talavera, who had just been ordained as a priest and, like Escamilla, was already a practitioner of cooperativism. On behalf of the SSM and with the hosting of the St. Francis Xavier University, Rodolfo, Manuel, and Carlos traveled to Nova Scotia at the turn of the decade to study the Antigonish Movement in Quebec and specifically to learn from the success of its adult education program as a means toward social improvement. Upon their return, they established the first "*cajas populares*" (parish-based credit and consumer unions) in León, and soon others followed in various working-class neighborhoods in Mexico City. These unions played a significant role in improving the economic conditions of thousands of people who organized themselves into cooperatives. A year later, the SSM published dozens of pamphlets explaining the benefits of the cajas populares, and these grew exponentially across the nation throughout the decade.[19]

Following his participation in Rome at the First World Congress of the Secular Apostolate in 1957, Escamilla shifted his attention to the expansion of the JOC. In addition to cooperativism, he promoted the See, Judge, Act method. After becoming reacquainted with Joseph Cardijn at a 1946 international conference of the JOC in San José, Costa Rica, Pedro Velázquez supported Escamilla's efforts. But despite his support, Velázquez understood that the ecclesiastical authorities in Mexico would continue to oppose the perceived radicalism of jocismo.[20]

Escamilla formed the first chapters of the JOC in 1957 in collaboration with the younger Jesús García, also a native of Michoacán, born in 1933 and ordained as a Jesuit priest during the 1950s. Together, they created chapters in a house located in the working-class Buenos Aires neighborhood in Mexico City. Others soon followed in La Malinche, Arenal, Progreso Nacional, and Tepito, also in the nation's capital. Their method of organizing consisted of training a selected group of militants in charge of leading teams of five or six young people who would be responsible for educating future members of the JOC and encouraging them to adopt the See, Judge, Act method. García, who had studied sociology in Europe, served as a key advisor to the young leaders. He led workshops that applied the tools of sociology to the revisión de vida

19. Velázquez H., *Pedro Velázquez H.*, 44–48; Velázquez, interview with the author.
20. Velázquez, interview with the author.

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method. With Escamilla, he had organized the first preliminary meeting of the JOC in Zacapu, Michoacán, where García also founded the Juventud Agraria Católica (Catholic Peasant Youth, JAC) in the early 1950s.[21]

New JOC and JAC chapters had emerged by the end of the decade, and in 1961, after the national JOC conference in Toluca, Escamilla and García called for the "massification" of their movement and approved the election of national representatives. However, conservative sectors of the church were suspicious of the radical lay activists who were attracted to the See, Judge, Act method and did not entirely welcome the success of the JOC or the ambitions of the radical *michoacanos*. This opposition was accentuated with the publication of two books written by Pedro Velázquez that tested the diplomatic relationship between the Church and the state, *Miseria de México: ¡Tierra desconocida!* (1946) and *Iniciación a la vida política* (1956). While the former provided a detailed sociological analysis of poverty across Mexico at a time when the government was promoting its revolutionary achievements, the latter reminded Catholics of their moral obligations to vote and elect representatives who truly embodied the social teachings of the Church.[22] Leading ecclesiastical authorities, who preferred to avoid confrontation with the government, interpreted this work as a campaign of opposition to the ruling PRI. Among them were the archbishops of Guadalajara and Puebla, José Garibi Rivera and Octaviano Márquez Toriz.[23]

In the same year that Velázquez published *Iniciación a la vida política*, Miguel Darío Miranda was appointed archbishop of Mexico, and two years later he was elected as the first general secretary of CELAM. He held this position until 1963, when Manuel Larraín from Chile, Hélder Câmara from Brazil, and Carlos McGrath from Panama took over the leadership of CELAM and pushed Latin American Catholicism toward the progressive path of liberation theology.[24] During his tenure (1956-63), Miranda spoke against the radicalism that emerged in the region in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, which coincided with the rise in popularity of the See, Judge, Act method, as widely adopted by myriad social movements across the continent during the 1960s.[25] Furthermore, he insisted that religious authorities should stay away from politics and instead engage exclusively with the catechism of the Church and its

21. García, interview with the author.

22. Pedro Velázquez H., *Miseria de México: ¡Tierra desconocida! Introducción a la Acción Social* (Mexico City: Secretariado Social Mexicano, 1946); Pedro Velázquez H. *Iniciación a la vida política* (Mexico City: Secretariado Social Mexicano, 1956).

23. García, interview with the author.

24. Nessan, *The Vitality of Liberation Theology,* 33–36.

25. Movimiento Internacional de Estudiantes Católicos-Juventud Estudiantil Católica Internacional (MIEC-JECI), "La coyuntura del movimiento hoy," *Servicio de Documentación* 1 (February 1972): 1–26.

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commitment to its faith.[26] These positions contrasted with those adopted by his successors, who instead championed the radical language of social justice, dignity, solidarity, and Third Worldism that emerged in the context of *aggiornamento* following the issuing of encyclicals like *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and the later and more progressive *Populorum Progressio* (1967).[27] As archbishop of Mexico, Miranda removed the politicized Velázquez from the directorship of the SSM in 1956, briefly sent him to Europe, and momentarily replaced him with José Garibi Rivera. The latter emerged as one of the most influential anticommunist voices of the Church and later a harsh critic of the 1968 student movement.

While in Europe, Velázquez reconnected with his friend and colleague from the Latin American College in Rome, Sergio Méndez Arceo. Both returned home convinced that the Mexican Church needed a liberationist approach. In collaboration with other leaders of the Church and rising intellectuals, they transformed the diocese of Cuernavaca into a hub of solidarity for various progressive movements that sparked across the country during the 1960s.[28] By contrast, Garibi Rivera and Márquez Toriz asked Cardinal Miranda to delay Velázquez's return to Mexico, but the archbishop refused to take such drastic measures. Instead, he demanded silence from Velázquez, who embraced a discreet profile and was reappointed as the director of the Secretariado in 1959.[29]

With the outbreak of the Cuban Revolution, Velázquez adopted an explicit anticommunist position. In response to the student protests demanding democratic control of the Autonomous University of Puebla (UAP) in 1960 and 1961, he saw the rise of Marxism inside the schools as a natural response to their dissatisfaction with the system, but, in contrast to a position later adopted by his friend Méndez Arceo, he argued that communism represented the worst option for the nation, as it threatened all forms of liberty and could potentially place the resources of Mexico entirely in the hands of the state.[30] For their part, Escamilla and García remained committed to the See, Judge, Act method. They continued to work with the JOC and pushed the SSM to adopt a progressive view toward the social and political unrest that emerged

26. Darío Miranda, letter to the Latin American Episcopal Council [hereafter CELAM], June 30, 1961, Darío Miranda, Memorándum sobre el IV Congreso Latinoamericano de Estudiantes (CLAE), July 10, 1961, and Darío Miranda, "Instrucción pastoral a los asistentes eclesiásticos de las organizaciones católicas," September 15, 1963; all in AHAM, Fondo Episcopal, Caja Darío Miranda.

27. Samuel Silva Gotay, *El pensamiento cristiano revolucionario en América Latina y el Caribe. Implicaciones de la teología de liberación para la sociología de la religion* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1989), 29–72.

28. Lya Gutiérrez Quintanilla, *Los volcanes de Cuernavaca: Sergio Méndez Arceo, Gregorio Lemercier, Iván Illich* (Mexico City: La Jornada Ediciones, 2007).

29. García, interview with the author; Andes, "A Catholic Alternative to Revolution."

30. A. Michel and P. Velázquez H., *La lucha comunista contra la religión. El testimonio de la 'Iglesia del silencio'* (1960), and "Normas para combartir la infiltración comunista" (1961), both in ASSM, Fondo Episcopado, Caja Correspondencia del Secretariado Social Mexicano.

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during the decade. Like Méndez Arceo, they saw no need to participate in the widely influential "Christianity, Yes; Communism, No!" campaigns that quickly expanded across the nation with support from multiple leaders of the Church, including Pedro Velázquez. Instead, in 1959 Escamilla traveled to Havana so that he could brief the SSM about the situation in Cuba and to provide advice to the Unión de Trabajadores Cristianos (Christian Workers' Union, UTC), which saw the leadership of Fidel Castro with suspicion but also disapproved of US aggression toward Cuba.[31]

In 1960, Escamilla aligned himself with a few members of the Partido de Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN), including the journalists Horacio Guajardo and Gerardo Medina, who welcomed the presence of militant Catholics in the labor unions. With their support and the work of the JOC chapters in the neighborhoods of Tepito and Buenos Aires, Escamilla was a key player in the creation of the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (Authentic Workers' Front, FAT), a confederation of labor unions composed mostly of former jocistas and young *panistas*. In addition, between 1961 and 1966 Escamilla continued to rely on the support of García, who became further involved with the popular projects of the Secretariado and began teaching theology at the seminary in Toluca. Together, Escamilla and García expanded the presence of the JOC to more than 15 dioceses across Mexico. These were the most successful years of the JOC, as it established its presence in all of the major industrial cities, but, as historian Gomes Moreira has argued, it was also a period when the ecclesiastical authorities aggressively undermined the work of Escamilla and his radical See, Judge, Act method. His superiors disapproved of his efforts to pin the success of the JOC exclusively on the effective leadership of lay workers, and not priests. They were equally critical of Escamilla's disdain of middle-class lay Catholics who, according to the Jesuit, had little understanding of poverty or what it meant to be politically disenfranchised. For the rebellious priest, in short, the future of the JOC, and the decisions it made, should be solely in the hands of the workers.[32]

In 1964, Archbishop Miranda acted to suppress the perceived radicalism of Escamilla by removing him from the leadership of the JOC and ordering the Asociación Católica de la Juventud Mexicana (Catholic Association of Mexican Youth, ACJM) to take over his movement. An organization of young men, the ACJM had its most active years in the 1920s and 1930s but had gradually lost

31. Jean Meyer, "La Iglesia católica en México 1929–1965," *Documentos de Trabajo del CIDE*, No. 30 (2005), 28.

32. Gomes Moreira, "Para una historia"; and María Susana Guzmán Triunfante, "El papel de los grupos católicos y su participación en el Frente Auténtico del Trabajo" (BA thesis: UNAM, 1996).

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the bulk of its membership in the 1950s.[33] Miranda also relocated the JOC from Mexico City to the conservative city of León, where powerful businessmen expressed concerns about the presence of Catholics in the labor unions.[34] In the mid to late 1960s the ACJM leadership tried to revive their organization, which had remained a loyal supporter of the most conservative wing of the church and disdained the radicalism of aggiornamento as a threat to the Catholic sensibilities of the nation.[35] While the JOC was momentarily removed from its desired working-class base, the continuous support from the key leaders of the SSM, García and Manuel Velázquez, allowed it to remain committed to its effective See, Judge, Act method of activism. It soon created new chapters across Mexico and established a stronger regional presence in Central America and the Caribbean.[36]

In 1965, Escamilla distanced himself from the JOC but remained loyal to his commitment to promote the See, Judge, Act method. He moved on to create the Movimiento de Trabajadores Católicos (Catholic Workers Movement, MTC) and continued to collaborate with the FAT, which successfully competed with the government-sponsored unions.[37] With support from Escamilla, young members of the PAN, and founders of the Christian Base Communities, the FAT declared its complete autonomy from the ecclesiastical authorities in 1966 and quickly expanded its bases across the nation during the 1970s.[38] Also in 1966, the International JOC celebrated its congress in Mexico City, but a disappointed Joseph Cardijn saw little future for the movement in Mexico, where the number of jocistas remained stagnant in comparison to other countries in Latin America.[39] In July 1967, Cardijn died, at the age of 85. The JOC remained active elsewhere across Latin America after his death, namely in Brazil, Chile, and Peru.[40]

Solidarity with the 1968 Student Movement and the Autonomy of CENCOS

In Mexico, the JOC experienced its most damaging clash with ecclesiastical and government authorities in the context of the student movement of 1968.

33. By contrast, its female counterpart, the JCFM, continued to thrive and reached its most successful years during the 1950s. See Gomes Moreira, "Para una historia," 209; Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política,* 211–220; and Soledad Loaeza, "Mexico in the Fifties: Women and Church in Holy Alliance," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33:3-4 (Fall-Winter 2005): 138–160.

34. Zárate Ortiz, "Las acciones y la represión," 55–64.

35. García, interview with the author.

36. Velázquez, interview with the author.

37. Gomes Moreira, "Para una historia," 217.

38. García, interview with the author; Guzmán Triunfante, "El papel de los grupos católicos," 24–29.

39. Sonia Bravo, Marcel Uylenbroeck, and Rienzie Rupasinghe, *Reporte Internacional de la JOC* (1966), and CEP, "Reflexiones JOC: nueva sociedad y movilización popular," (Lima, Peru, October 1971), both in ASLA-FLP, Fondo JOCI, Caja Mexico, Centroamerica y el Caribe.

40. Scott Mainwaring, "The Catholic Youth Workers Movement (JOC) and the Emergence of the Popular Church in Brazil," Kellogg Institute for International Studies, Working Paper No. 6 (December 1983), 1–53.

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Jocistas expressed strong support for the students and boldly condemned state repression. In doing so, they confronted an ecclesiastical leadership headed by the conservative bishop of León, Anselmo Zarza Bernal, who made every effort to silence them, including the withdrawal of episcopal and economic support of the JOC. The bishop got rid of the national representatives of the JOC and pushed many of its members to abandon their movement. Searching for greater autonomy, these jocistas joined other independent organizations, including the FAT, which remained an autonomous labor federation, as envisioned by its founder Escamilla.[41]

The JOC made its first substantial statement regarding the 1968 student movement on September 1, the same day Gustavo Díaz Ordaz gave his fourth annual address to the nation. In that speech, the president accused students of taking advantage of the international visibility of the Olympics to defame the nation, insisted that their movement had been hijacked by foreign entities, and ordered them to halt their strike and resume their classes.[42] In contrast, jocistas described the movement as "transcendental" in raising the political consciousness of the country, and in successfully highlighting the need to create a democratic society.[43] Moreover, following the See, Judge, Act method, the leadership of the JOC saw the movement as part of a broader international effort that called for closing the economic and political gap between an authoritarian minority and a disenfranchised and disadvantaged majority. Failing to support the students was simply sinful, they argued, while remaining on the sidelines was equivalent to siding with the repressors.[44]

In solidarity with the student movement, the national president of the JOC, Ramón García, met several times with leading members of the Consejo Nacional de Huelga (National Strike Council, CNH) during the first week of September. After multiple discussions with them, he published a manifesto titled "Truth, Justice and Liberty," in which the JOC declared its full support of the students. The statement lamented that the press and the ecclesiastical authorities sided with the government, producing "a narrative that vilified the students." They concluded that "Justice and Liberty," would only take place

41. García, interview with the author; Zárate Ortiz, "Las acciones y la represión de la Iglesia," 81–96.

42. These sentiments were widely shared among different sectors of conservative Mexico. See for example Jaime M. Pensado, *Rebel Mexico, Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 201–234; and Ariel Rodríguez Kuri, "El lado oscuro de la luna. El momento conservador en 1968," in *Conservadurismo y derechas en la historia de México, Vol.2,* Erika Pani, ed. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008), 512–559.

43. La JOC como movimiento de Iglesia, sobre el movimiento estudiantil, September 1, 1968, AHAM, Fondo Episcopal, Caja Darío Miranda.

44. El movimiento estudiantil, la JOC mexicana y la jerarquía. Relación cronológica: agosto 68-enero 69, 1969, AACM, Fondo Asociaciones Católicas Relacionadas con la Acción Católica, Caja Juventud Mexicana de Acción Catolica.

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with the revoking of the law of social dissolution (employed since the 1950s to imprison labor and student activists). They argued that justice could exist only when the worker is conscious of the capitalist system that exploits him or her and the consumer realizes the crucial role US companies play in promoting a materialistic culture. They demanded that the universities break their relationship with powerful *caciques* and create spaces for productive dialogue, including the participation of communists who often shared the same concerns. "Without genuine dialogue," they declared, the students cannot engage in meaningful action and thus "the prospect of liberty and justice" will continue to be at risk. "We must all fight for the right to protest, regardless of our political points of view, without having to censor ourselves in fear of state repression."[45]

The statements made by Ramón García did not go unnoticed by the bishop of León, where the JOC had been headquartered since 1964. On September 23, Bishop Zarza called Ramón García to his office to express his dissatisfaction with the JOC, reminding the young leader that the Church could not be associated with political movements that had "objectionable goals," and "engaged in violent acts" that were ostensibly "led by foreign agents." For these reasons, Zarza prohibited Ramón García from any further contact with the students, to which the national representative of the JOC replied that "the movement was also composed of young Christians who were committed to the language and principles of Vatican II." Hoping to retain the leadership of the organization and support the movement, Ramón García sent a letter to the international headquarters in Brussels explaining the JOC's position. The International JOC reacted positively and sent a letter of support to all of its national offices in Latin America, in which they explained the democratic nature of the movement and its relevance to the founding principles of justice and solidarity, as originally voiced by Joseph Cardijn.[46] Furious that Ramón García had acted over his authority, Zarza declared that his diocese would no longer support the JOC and that any further dialogue would have to take place with the archbishop of Oaxaca, Ernesto Corripio Ahumada, who, in turn, declined to support the organization in light of his opposition to the students.[47] A weakened and divided JOC remained active in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco massacre, but many of its members left the organization. Some did it out of fear of persecution from government authorities, while others left to join more radical movements.[48]

45. JOC, Verdad, Justicia, Libertad, September 1, 1968, AHAM, Fondo Episcopal, Caja Darío Miranda.

46. Declaración del Comité Ejecutivo de la JOC Internacional, 1968, ASLA-FLP, Fondo JOCI, Caja Mexico, Centroamerica y el Caribe.

47. Gomes Moreira, "Para una historia," 210–213; Zárate Ortiz, "Las acciones y la represión," 87.

48. García, interview with the author.

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The final blow to the JOC took place on February 19, 1969, when the bishop of León requested the support of Archbishop Miranda to put an end to the organization. He explained that the only reason that the agonizing JOC remained politically active was the insistence of a small group of radical priests who supported it, namely the director of the SSM, Manuel Velázquez, and three local priests from León who allegedly conspired against Zarza. "I beg you," he concluded in his letter to Miranda, "to look into the motivations of these people."[49] By the end of that month, priests across the nation were prohibited from establishing further contacts with a JOC that was no longer recognized by the Mexican Church.[50]

Pedro Velázquez, who had timidly welcomed the language of aggiornamento but who nonetheless served as one of the guiding counsels of CELAM in drafting the Medellin conference documents, conveyed to his friends his anger at the brutality of the Mexican state during the 1968 movement.[51] And although he failed to express public support for the students, he nonetheless pressured the Church to publish a response to the Tlatelolco massacre. Widely reprinted in most of the nation's newspapers on October 9, 1968, and signed by the Episcopate Committee, the letter strategically condemned all forms of violence, including the alleged acts of vandalism by the students, and, without making reference to the actions of security forces or to the jailing of political prisoners, noted that "we were all responsible" for the Tlatelolco massacre.[52] With a long history of health complications, Velázquez died in December of 1968. His brother Manuel took over the leadership of the SSM and expressed a more condemnatory attitude toward state violence during the 1970s. The same was true of José Álvarez Icaza, founder of CENCOS in 1964.[53]

In its initial years, during the 1960s, CENCOS welcomed the progressive language of aggiornamento, but for the most part it aligned with the social and economic policies championed by the PRI regime.[54] This changed drastically in 1968 when students pressured CENCOS to lend them its offices to publish manifestos for the movement. More importantly, the student movements pressured CENCOS to adopt a radical position that welcomed a dialogue with

49. Anselmo Zarza Bernal, letter to Darío Miranda, February 19, 1969, AHAM, Fondo Episcopal, Caja Darío Miranda.

50. García, interview with the author.

51. Concha, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 11, 2016.

52. Ernesto Corripio Ahumada, Mensaje Pastoral, October 9, 1968, AHAM, Fondo Episcopal, Caja Corripio Ahumada.

53. García, interview with the author; Velázquez H., *Pedro Velázquez H.*, 77–103. On the Reflexión Episcopal Pastoral, see Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia católica*, 253–255.

54. Pastor Escobar, "Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano," 155–157.

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Marxism, consistent with Vatican II.[55] When the Tlatelolco massacre took place, Álvarez Icaza was in Rome attending the Fourth World Congress for the Lay Apostolate. Appalled by the images he saw published in the Italian newspapers, and then disillusioned with the lack of condemnation from ecclesiastical authorities on his return to Mexico, he concluded that CENCOS had failed to take an assertive position in support of the movement and realized that he "could no longer serve as a speaking representative of the Episcopate." Tensions between the latter and CENCOS peaked in April 1969, when Álvarez Icaza officially announced that his organization would no longer depend on the economic support of the Church or the blessing of its authorities. As a civic and autonomous organization, CENCOS continued to promote the social teaching of the Church, playing a profound role in championing human rights and in articulating the radical tenets of liberation theology in response to continuous state repression and the rise of neoliberalism in Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s.[56]

During the 1970s, Manuel Velázquez, Jesús García, and Álvarez Icaza emerged as isolated but powerful Catholic voices who protested the tortures, disappearances, and killings of political activists that swelled during these years. In 1977, they joined the radical Jesuit priest and founder of *Proceso* Enrique Maza in speaking loudly against the assassination of Escamilla and his friend Rodolfo Aguilar Álvarez.

THE REPRESSION OF REBELLIOUS PRIESTS

On November 5, 1972, the president of CENCOS, José Álvarez Icaza, published the disparaging testimony of Carlos De Anda, the head of the Marist priests, in which he condemned the brutality of the state. Published in the daily *Excélsior*, De Anda's testimony blamed the administration of President Luis Echeverría for the kidnapping and torturing of priests Oscar Núñez and Rafael Reygadas. According to the original account, given by the Marist priests who were present, a group of secret agents disguised as employees of the local power company rang the bell of their home on October 3. Once inside, the heavily armed men ransacked their office, taking everything they deemed suspicious, including a pamphlet on liberation theology. Reygadas was not present at the house, but the assailants shoved Núñez into the back seat of a car without license plates. Once blindfolded, he was taken to a prison equipped with torturing devices, that included "all the elements [needed] for terrorizing

55. Escobar, "Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano, 222–226.

56. Escobar, "Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano, 226–262; Quezada, "The Revolution in Crisis."

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people." Located "somewhere in the southeastern part of the city," the prison was packed with dozens of young people who were tortured. Reygadas was kidnapped separately and taken to the prison the next day. "It was an atmosphere 'psychologically' created to make people talk," said Núñez in his testimony.[57] Years later, Reygadas explained that the prison was located at Campo Militar #1, the same military facility where activists of the 1968 student movement were tortured and disappeared.[58] The place "smelled like death"; he added, "You could feel the fearful madness in the air, while the screaming of people tortured in other rooms pierced you like a knife into your soul."[59]

The terror started as soon as the Marist priests arrived at the prison. According to Núñez, one of their torturers applied electric shocks to his genitals and angrily said to him, "We are not going to tolerate any hero priests in Mexico! There will be no martyrs in the style of [Colombian priest] Camilo Torres here. Be careful, because you are going to have some fatal accidents here!" The nickname of their torturer was "El Manzanas," who "caressed his submachine-guns" and further told the priests, "as he spat on the floor": "This is war. You cannot expect legal and considerate treatment because we are not in normal, peaceful times." A different man asked, "Do you think that you can hide behind your cassock [and] receive immunity because you are priests[?]" Another torturer shouted, "We are going to smash you without mercy." According to De Anda, the torturers took turns plunging the priests into a tank of water and then beating them. More than 35 hours had passed since Núñez was kidnapped, while the unfed priests waited in a room without cots or blankets. On the night of October 5, they were blindfolded and placed in another unmarked car, where one of the torturers told them, "I am very sorry for what we have done. Forgive us." They were then dropped off near La Merced market. According to De Anda, "the cries [of the people tortured at the prison] were heartrending," while the accusations made against the priests were "baseless and ridiculous." As he explained to Álvarez Icaza, "The interrogators took turns reading the lists of charges made against them," ranging from manufacturing bombs, blackmailing the authorities, planning the "kidnapping of a very rich Jewish person," and serving as the "liaison between the guerrilla group of Lucio Cabañas" and the urban radical groups in charge of "collecting money [and] weapons to [send to] the mountains of Guerrero."[60]

57. "CIA Involvement Hinted in Torture of Priests," article translated from *Excélsior*, November 5, 1972. United States. Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS), Translations on Latin America, No. 822.

58. Pastor Escobar, "Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano," 255.

59. Reygadas, interview with the author, October 30, 2020, Mexico City.

60. "CIA Involvement Hinted in Torture of Priests."

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Appalled by the baseless and bizarre allegations and the horrendous accounts of state brutality, the leader of CENCOS explained to his readers that such methods of torture and intimidation were typical of CIA-sponsored operations in other countries of Latin America. Álvarez Icaza then pleaded, "We must not allow torture as a system of repression to enthrone itself in Mexico, as is happening today in Brazil."[61] Similarly, an anonymous column published in *La Nación,* the weekly magazine of the PAN, indignantly asked, "Has Mexico institutionalized torture?" In claiming that the torture of the priests was not an isolated phenomenon, the author reported that a group of teachers and students from the National Agricultural School of Chapingo, who allegedly worked under the guidance of a priest, had suffered a similar fate—they too were kidnapped and beaten. "Tragically," the anonymous writer reckoned, "no authority has made a statement, leaving us to conclude that any of us [who question state abuse] can become victims of similar crimes, anytime and anywhere in the country. Is this the beginning of a new and shameless chapter in our history?" In agreement, Álvarez Icaza and Manuel Velázquez concluded that what Mexico needed was a truly democratic system with a reliable judicial system capable of protecting its citizens from human rights abuses and acts of impunity.[62]

The Radicalization of Priests and the Unresolved Murders of Escamilla and Aguilar

What made Núñez and Reygadas so dangerous in the eyes of the authorities was their affiliation with the Centro Politécnico de Proyección (Projection Center of the Polytechnic, CPP) and their open embracement of socialism. The CPP was founded by the Society of Mary in 1966, with Núñez and Pedro Herrasti at the helm; both were public supporters of the 1968 student movement. Their goal was to create a university parish inside the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) capable of "evangelizing its students."[63] Reygadas joined them in 1972, a few weeks before he was kidnapped and tortured alongside Núñez. The CPP organized round-table discussions, leadership workshops, and athletic competitions. Their most successful events were those that involved hiking and spiritual retreats. The Marists priests often took students to the Ajusco mountains in the outskirts of Mexico City for the weekend, where they spoke of their participation as founding leaders of the socialist Sacerdotes para el

61. "CIA Involvement Hinted in Torture of Priests."

62. "México, ¿Se institucionaliza la tortura?" *La Nación* 1363 (November 16, 1972); "Father Velázquez views Church's Social, Political Mission," article translated from *por qué?,* April 6, 1972. United States. Joint Publication Research Service Reports (JPRS), Translations on Latin America, No. 711.

63. Concha, interview with the author; Gerardo Fernández, "Cerca del mundo estudiantil: historia y presencia del Centro Politécnico de Proyección," *Signos de los Tiempos* 50 (May-June, 1993): 32–33.

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Pueblo (Priests for the People, SPP). There, they also encouraged their Catholic students to adopt liberation theology and become invested in improving the lives of the poor, as championed by similar Latin American movements such as Priests for the Third World in Argentina, the National Office of Social Information (ONIS) in Peru, and Golconda in Colombia.[64]

The SPP was founded in 1972 by a group of theologians, headed by the Dominican Alex Morelli, who embraced the preferential option for the poor and called for socialism. Among them were the Marist priests Núñez and Reygadas, and a group of Jesuits who fortified networks with student activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, namely Luis del Valle and Martín de la Rosa, among others.[65] Their four central goals included strengthening ties with the popular sectors of society; helping them achieve economic and political independence from caciques and political parties; teaching them the principles of liberation theology as practical tools to improve their everyday lives; and calling for a socialist alternative to capitalism.[66] Reygadas remained active with the SPP until the movement dissolved in 1975, primarily as a result of pressures from ecclesiastical authorities.[67] For Núñez, his involvement with the liberationist movement ended immediately after he was tortured. Within days, he left for Paris, where he got a job teaching philosophy. "I visited him twice in France during the 1970s," recalled García. "He was distraught and promised that he would never return to Mexico." He never did.[68]

Years later, Reygadas revealed in an interview that one of the individuals who oversaw the priests' torture was Miguel Nazar Haro, a violent agent who had worked for the infamous DFS since the 1960s and who became head of the same institution of surveillance and state repression from 1978 to 1982. His victims remember him as someone who took pleasure in seeing people suffer.[69] "Oscar took the brunt" of the beatings, Reygadas noted. But they both remained terrorized. General Raúl Mendiolea Cerecero, head of the Special Services Section of the Mexico City Police and a key player during the Tlatelolco massacre, also directed their torture. Specifically, he wanted to extract information about the alleged involvement of Jesuits from Monterrey in supporting the guerrilla movements. "It was Mendiolea and Nazar Haro who

64. Fernández, "Cerca del mundo estudiantil," 32; "Documentos Base del Movimiento Sacerdotes para el Pueblo," *Contacto,* December 1972, 58–61; Laudelino Cuetos, interview with the author, March 10, 2016, Mexico City.

65. García, interview with the author.

66. Young-Hyun Jo, "Movimiento 'Sacerdotes para el Pueblo' y la transformación socioeclesiástica en México," *Revista Iberoamericana* 21:1 (2010): 81–104.

67. Arias, et al., *Radiografía de la iglesia,* 75–77; Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia,* 278–282.

68. García, interview with the author.

69. Reygadas, interview, in Pastor Escobar, "Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano," 254–255. See also McCormick, "Torture," 260.

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told us that a young man in Monterrey (under torture) had accused us of having connections to guerrilla priests and this is why we were illegally arrested, without a formal investigation. That is how they operated, with impunity and lack of accountability. They were simply interested in hearing what they wanted to hear."[70]

Reygadas considered going into exile, as had Núñez, but after consulting with one of his superiors, he decided to take refuge at a Dominican convent in Tolantongo, Hidalgo. There the Marist priest stayed for 30 days, with the help of the friar and key advocate of the human rights, Miguel Concha Malo. In addition to Concha Malo," Reygadas added, "it was Álvarez Icaza who ultimately came in our defense. Unfortunately, that was not the case of the ecclesiastical authorities who failed to follow his example."[71]

Reygadas had met the leader of CENCOS in the mid 1960s. In 1972, they participated in the Christians for Socialism Conference in Chile, where dozens of leaders of the Latin American Church met to discuss the social and economic injustices in the region with attention to liberation theology and its dialogue with Marxism.[72] Soon after, Reygadas left the priesthood. Álvarez Icaza published new testimonies denouncing the violation of human rights.[73] For Reygadas, the decision to leave the Church rested largely on his conclusion that ecclesiastical authorities had failed to condemn state repression. A majority of them, he explained, felt threatened by the ideas of Sacerdotes para el Pueblo.[74]

García reached a similar conclusion and saw the crimes against radical priests as part of a broader Latin American story that began with the 1964 coup in Brazil and continued with the long tenure of conservative Colombian priest Alfonso López Trujillo as leader of CELAM, from 1972 to 1984. During this time, García explained, "the conservative majority of Latin American bishops combatted the radicalism of Liberation Theology going as far as to minimize, overlook, and even privately justify the repression of radical priests." Unfortunately, he noted, "in Mexico the Núñez and Reygadas cases were not isolated exceptions." His friend Rodolfo Escamilla was murdered in 1977; others suffered the same fate. "Like Héctor Gallego in Panamá and Carlos Mugica in Argentina," García argued, Mexican priests "were also callously assassinated."[75]

70. Reygadas, interview with the author.

71. Reygadas, interview with the author; "CIA Involvement Hinted in Torture of Priests"; Pastor Escobar, "Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano," 254–255.

72. García, interview with the author; Hugo Assman, "Los Cristianos Revolucionarios Aliados," *Contacto,* January 1972, 23–42.

73. Rafael Reygadas, interview, in Pastor Escobar, "Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano," 211–216.

74. Rafael Reygadas, interview, in Pastor Escobar, Vaticano II en el laicado mexicano, 211–216.

75. García, interview with the author. See also García, "La Iglesia Mexicana desde 1962."

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The murder of Escamilla took place on April 27, 1977, but as García suggests, "his killing needs to be understood in the broader context of the 1970s."[76] These years marked the time "when Christian Base communities and guerrilla movements simultaneously expanded across the country," he explained. At the time, "a number of radical priests grew increasingly defiant against the brutality of the state" and some of them openly called for a socialist alternative to capitalism, as was the case with Sacerdotes para el Pueblo. A year after Núñez and Reygadas were tortured, "many of us followed the leading position taken by the Bishop of Cuernavaca [Méndez Arceo]." Collectively, "we had protested against the second student massacre, on June 10, 1971," when dozens of young activists were killed at the hands of a paramilitary group with ties to President Echeverría.[77] Four years later, in November 1975, 19-year-old Fernando Calvillo and 21-year-old Juan Bosco Rosillo were killed. Both were politically engaged members of the ACJM, and while the episcopate demanded an investigation and several newspapers reported on the crimes, their killers were never identified.[78] A year later, the hitherto untouched bishops of Cuernavaca and San Cristóbal de las Casas, Méndez Arceo and Samuel Ruiz, were expelled from Ecuador, where they were attending a conference, along with other "radical Mexican priests who were [allegedly] agitating" in South America, including, among others, Jesús García.[79]

The repression against radical priests reached its most violent moment at the end of the Echeverría administration, between 1976 and 1977. A month prior to the killing of Escamilla, 26-year-old Rodolfo Aguilar Álvarez was gunned down in his native state of Chihuahua. Known to his friends as "El Chapo" ("shorty"), Aguilar had served as a priest for only two years. During this time, he preached the principles of liberation theology in his homilies at the Nombre de Dios parish in Chihuahua and hosted weekly meetings at the church to organize a group of displaced campesinos. With them, he organized the Comité de Derechos del Barrio Nombre de Dios, a cooperative that demanded the return of their lands and public services for their communities. In a meeting with the governor of Chihuahua, Manuel Bernardo Aguirre on June 25, 1975, the young priest was ordered to put an end to "his agitating and subversive actions." Four days later, his house was burned down; the local press blamed a group of *guerrilleros* for the crime. Despite the threats, the priests remained active with the committee. Just days before his death, Aguilar publicly stated,

76. García, interview with the author. This argument is also made in Arias et al., *Radiografía de la iglesia,* 53–61; and Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia,* 311–314.

77. García, interview with the author; Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 269–270.

78. Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 313.

79. Jesús Antonio de la Torre Rangel, "Represión a los Cristianos en México," (September-October 1977): 357–359. Caracas, Venezuela: Centro Gumilla, http://biblioteca.gumilla.org/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=141574, accessed February 1, 2022.

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"If something happens to me, the only people that will be responsible are those working with the government."[80] On March 21, 1977, he was kidnapped and gunned down. His murder was never investigated, and with the exception of some lay journalists and priests from *La Nación,* CENCOS and *Proceso*, no Catholic authorities protested against the atrocious crime.[81]

The lack of involvement from the highest authorities of the Church in relation to the murder of Aguilar stood in vast contrast to the way a handful of influential bishops responded to the harassment, intimidation, and arrest of José Batarse Charur, a priest from Torreón, Coahuila, who was jailed on two different occasions, labeled a "communist" by the local press, and ultimately expelled from his parish, first in October 1976 and again in May 1977. Like Aguilar, Batarse was also an outspoken critic of caciquismo and a vocal sympathizer of liberation theology.[82] Following a second arrest in May 15, 1977, Batarse moved to Chiapas, where he first assisted Bishop Samuel Ruiz in the expansion of Christian Base Communities, but ultimately abandoned the priesthood and married.[83]

By the time Escamilla was killed in April 1977, it was clear that a pattern of state repression had been established, including an effort to create confusion in the press and minimize the role of government authorities in the crimes. By then, the radical priest from Michoacán had opened an office in Mexico City's Colonia Roma on behalf of the Centro Social de Promoción Popular (Social Center for the Advancement of the People), a collective project of displaced citizens that supported land reform and a halt to gentrification. There, he also organized people who had been evicted from their homes and led workshops to brief them on their legal rights and to encourage them to create autonomous and self-reliant organizations.[84]

Escamilla's killing received wide but inconsistent and sometimes disbelieving coverage in the press. As with the killings and disappearances of countless activists of the time, the press presented his murder as a tragic outcome of the radicalism of the era. According to accounts by two key witnesses of the murder, and as reported in several newspapers, the alleged killer was a 25-year-old man who shot the priest in the back five or six times. Under his right arm, the assassin allegedly carried dozens of Leninist pamphlets with

80. De la Torre Rangel, "Represión a los Cristianos en México," 357–359.

81. Arias et al., *Radiografía de la iglesia*, 57–59.

82. Arias et al., *Radiografía de la iglesia*, 53–57.

83. Jorge Puma Crespo, "Los maoístas del norte de México: breve historia de Política Popular-Línea Proletaria, 1969-1979," *Izquierdas* 27 (April 2016): 211; Carlos Montemayor, *Chiapas. La rebelión indígena de México* (Mexico City: Debolsillo, 2008), 99–100.

84. Quiroz Mendoza, "Memoria, identidad y participación de los jóvenes," 37–70.

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messages on the emancipation of women. The officer who captured the killer stated that the young man was a member of the Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre, the largest guerrilla organization in Mexico, founded in 1972, which bore the brunt of state terror during the 1970s.[85] The daily *El Informador* questioned the validity of this narrative, telling its readers that "Escamilla had a long history of practicing a Marxist doctrine," while qualifying a statement made by Manuel Velázquez that the priest was "above all, a long-time defender of human rights." Citing the director of the SSM, the newspaper "demanded an exhaustive investigation" and called for "greater solidarity with a [progressive] sector of the church that, with its own blood, has awakened a greater sense of justice."[86] Yet, unlike their reaction in the case of Batarse, the highest ecclesiastical authorities made no public condemnation.[87]

For its part, the conservative daily *Avance* identified José Barrigueta Sada as the alleged lone-wolf assassin. According to the publication, the killer was a leading member of the "Communist group 'Antonio Gramsci' who had received support from Escamilla" but who "murdered the priest in an effort to take over the printing press of the Centro Social" and publish the radical pamphlets of his organization.[88] For Jesús García, "these and similar outlandish accounts published in various newspapers served two purposes: to stain the memory of Escamilla and question the legitimacy of the work he was doing with the Centro Social in effectively halting the developmentalist projects of urbanization."

By the late 1960s, Escamilla's efforts on behalf of workers, "had already produced the results that he wanted." The FAT had emerged "as the only labor union in the country that could truly claim to be independent from the government, from the political parties, and from the wealthy industrialists," García explained. Moreover, Escamilla had "moved to organize people who had been displaced from their homes." He added, "His most successful project resulted in the creation of the Palo Alto Cooperative." Located in the southern part of the city, near the highway to Toluca, the cooperative included the work of hundreds of families who collectively occupied and eventually claimed ownership of their lands and effectively advocated for public services and the building of public schools and

85. Adela Cedillo, "The 23rd of September Communist League's *foco* experiment in the Sierra Baja Tarahumara (1973–1975)," in *México Beyond 1968*, Pensado and Ochoa, eds., 92–112.

86. "Misterio en el asesinato de un sacerdote en el D.F.," *El Informador;* April 29, 1977; "Piden que aclaren el crimen," *El Porvenir*, April 29, 1977.

87. Roberto Blancarte cites two exceptions, published in *Contacto,* in which the bishops of Cuernavaca and Chihuahua, Sergio Méndez Arceo and Adalberto Almedia, protested the assassination of Escamilla García, but these condemnations did not receive wide national attention. Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 354–355.

88. "Identificado el asesino del cura," *Avance,* May 3, 1977; "Represión sangrienta contra la Iglesia en Latinoamérica," *Avance,* May 8, 1977; "Barriguete Sada mató al sacerdote Escamilla, porque éste quería el control absoluto el grupo subversivo," *Avance,* May 12, 1977.

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health clinics.[89] In García's interpretation, the cooperative contrasted with the developmentalist projects of the government. "There was no mystery. It was clear why they killed him."[90]

CENCOS, SSM, and *Proceso* backed the version given by García. They published multiple denunciations following the killing of Escamilla, demanding not only an investigation of his case and an immediate end to state repression, but also the creation of a national human rights organization.[91] In July 1977, the Mexico City offices of the SSM, CENCOS, and the Jesuit Order were ransacked by DFS agents, while a press campaign continued to link them to violent leftist groups.[92] "You have to give it to the agents of the government and the ecclesiastical authorities that blessed them," García sarcastically concluded in the interview. "The blatant manipulation of the facts worked for them in 1968 and remained an effective tool of repression throughout the 1970s."[93] The radical priest and once director of the Jesuit journal *Christus* (1968-72) Enrique Maza agreed. In 1968 and 1971 he had provided harsh criticisms of government authorities in the Jesuit journal, making them solely responsible for the Tlatelolco and Corpus Christi massacres. In 1972, Church authorities removed him from the directorship of *Christus*. Four years later, the ecclesiastical authorities similarly forced Alex Morelli to step down as director of the radical catholic magazine *Contacto*. That same year, Maza founded *Proceso*, where he opened a space for radical Catholics —including, among others, Miguel Ángel Granados Chapa, Alejandro Aviles, and Gaspar Elizondo—to denounce the assassination of Aguilar and Escamilla as a gross violation of human rights. These influential journalists joined Maza in depicting the assassinations as an "unambiguous effort" on the part of government and ecclesiastical authorities to "silence" those who practiced the preferential option for the poor.[94]

CONCLUSION

In February 1974, Echeverría traveled to Rome to visit the Pope, making him the first Mexican president to set foot inside the Vatican since 1857. During his

89. García, interview with the author.

90. García, interview with the author.

91. Arias, et al., *Radiografía de la iglesia,* 59–61.

92. Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia,* 354; "Police Raid Ecumenical Center in Mexico," *Latinamerica Press* 9:30 (July 28, 1977): 1.

93. García, interview with the author. A similar conclusion is made by the progressive Jesuit, Martín de la Rosa in "La Iglesia católica en México del Vaticano II a la CELAM (1965–1970)," *Cuadernos Políticos* 19 (January-March 1979): 88–104.

94. See among others Enrique Maza, "Sacerdote asesinado en Chihuahua," *Proceso* 21, March 1977; Alejandro Aviles, "Defensa de los derechos humanos," *Proceso* 22, March 1977; Enrique Maza, "El asesinato," *Proceso* 24, April 1977; Gaspar Elizondo, "Terrorismo de derecha"; Miguel Ángel Granados Chapa, "Documento No. 27," *Proceso* 27, April 1977; and Enrique Meza, "Asalto policial a CENCOS," *Proceso* 37, July 1977.

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meeting with Paul VI, he presented the Holy See with an official letter, "From the Third World," explaining the leading role Mexico had assumed under his presidency in defending the economic and political rights of the developing nations.[95]

With time, Jesús García came to understand Echeverría's meeting with the Pope, as "yet another attempt by [the Mexican president] to obscure his politics of repression." Whereas Díaz Ordaz "did not make an attempt to hide his authoritarianism," he added, "his successor went to great length to keep himself away from the terror that so many people faced during his administration and instead present himself as a champion of democracy." Similarly, his visits to Communist countries, in general—and the measures he took to free political prisoners, lower the voting age to 18, revoke the law of social dissolution from the Federal Criminal Code, give asylum to exiles from South America, and implement specific steps to relax censorship in the press and the film industry, in particular—should be interpreted, according to García, as part of Echeverría's "larger efforts" to pander to the Left and "receive their support."[96]

García is largely correct in his depiction of the Mexican president, but as I have argued in this article, the repression of the 1970s should not be understood exclusively in relation to a single individual. Instead, it should be placed in the broader historical context of the Cold War era, taking into consideration the Catholic Church as a key player. The Church, however, was not the monolithic entity that is often portrayed in the scholarship. Multiple players expressed divergent understanding of their imagined Catholic nation as they responded to and shaped, in their different ways, the local manifestations of the postwar era.

Among these key players were powerful conservatives who saw the rise of liberation theology and the rebellious priests who adopted the See, Judge, Act method as real threats to their authority and to social order more broadly. When perceived radical priests were tortured and assassinated, these conservatives opted to remain silent and so did the leading ecclesiastical authorities of the Church, who placed greater importance on securing their relationship with the regime and often said little to refute the false narratives published in the government-friendly press. Similarly, with the exception of independent journalists writing in *Proceso* and other radical magazines, most leftist intellectuals said little about the repression of religious figures at the

95. Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 299–302.
96. García, interview with the author.

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hands of government authorities, including agents of the DFS who tortured, kidnapped, and imprisoned priests. Instead, the loudest voices often came from *panista* journalists writing in *La Nación,* and from progressive Catholics who pushed their organization to achieve autonomy from the ecclesiastical authorities, namely a handful of individuals affiliated with the SSM and CENCOS.

The significance of jocismo, partially examined here in relation to the See, Judge, Act method, is a transnational history that deserves further attention in the scholarship of modern Mexico. Escamilla, members of the JOC, leaders of the SSM, and progressive Catholics active in other youth organizations found inspiration in the language and activism of the Revisión de vida method prior to Vatican II and after the 1968 student movement. Historians of the Global Sixties have examined both of these events as the central catalysts of change of the era, but scholars writing on the social and political movements of these years should consider the influence this method had on a new generation of activists.[97]

Nonetheless, the progressive Catholicism that emerged in the 1940s and peaked during the 1960s and 1970s did not constitute a single movement. Multiple expressions of it developed in response to a variety of events, concepts, and figures. The case of Pedro Velázquez is emblematic. While he remained a strong advocate of the social teachings of the Church and a lifetime supporter of radicals like Escamilla, he never entirely embraced the language and ideas of liberation theology that concerned so many conservative figures across the continent. When he died, in 1968, the overwhelming majority of leaders of the Mexican Church said little to criticize state repression. By contrast, the bishops of Cuernavaca, San Cristóbal de las Casas, and Chihuahua welcomed a productive dialogue with a broad range of militants, including Marxists, and frequently came to the defense of those who fell victim to state repression. Collectively, they intervened on behalf of Fr. Batarse in Coahuila, and it was this intervention that likely kept him alive. In a 1977 interview with *Proceso,* the Torreón priest noted his thoughts while residing in Chiapas: "When I was kidnapped—on May 15 of last year—I was convinced that they were going to kill me," just as had happened to Aguilar and Escamilla. He explained, "It was clear that their intention was to kill me. They would then place the blame on the independent organizations [that I was defending] and use this as an excuse to repress them." Yet, "something went wrong [for the local authorities]."

97. Jaime M. Pensado, "El Movimiento Estudiantil Profesional (MEP): una mirada a la radicalización de la juventud católica mexicana durante la Guerra Fría," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 31:1 (Winter 2015): 156–192.

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Batarse never explained why his life was spared. It is clear, however, that he was referring to the overwhelming support that he received from influential ecclesiastical authorities who intervened, namely progressive bishops who welcomed liberation theology, but who surprisingly said little in response to the killings of Aguilar and Escamilla.[98]

University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana
jpensado@nd.edu

JAIME M. PENSADO

98. "'Me iban a matar', denuncia el padre Sebastián," *Proceso*, June 6, 1977.

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