

V. Models of Dissent: The Chicano Movement in the Roman Catholic Church

This contribution to the roundtable will compare two forms of protest in the church—one that is radical and challenges the church from the outside, and the other that is institutional and challenges the church from the inside. For case studies, I will compare *Católicos Por La Raza* (CPLR), a group of Chicano students that employed dramatic demonstrations in its protest of the Catholic Church, and PADRES, an organization of Catholic priests that utilized the tools at its disposal to challenge racism from within the hierarchy. I will outline the ecclesiologies of CPLR and PADRES, the ways in which these visions led to differing means of dissent, and the successes and failures of each group.

CPLR and PADRES shared many characteristics. Both began in 1969; both recognized the Catholic hierarchy's racism toward Chicanos; and both had members awakened to racial consciousness through their interactions with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. In the United States, the majority-Anglo Catholic hierarchy had long discriminated against Mexican Americans. Chicano Catholic groups developed as part of the Mexican American civil rights movement to dissent from Anglo hegemony, challenge the church's exclusion of Chicanos from leadership, and highlight the church's participation in socioeconomic injustice.

Católicos Por La Raza formed in fall 1969 and brought together students from Los Angeles-area Chicano activist organizations. The young people had broad experience in the Chicano movement, including ties to Cesar Chavez, the Brown Berets, and the Chicano Blowouts.³⁹ These movements sometimes used forceful protest to challenge racial inequality in social and government institutions. CPLR discovered rampant racism in the church, an organization they claimed was the "richest and strongest institution in the world."⁴⁰ CPLR turned to the life of Jesus Christ as a model for dissent. Christ, they believed, lived in solidarity with the marginalized and upset the established order to bring justice. CPLR defended their use of protest with the example of the angry Christ who overturned the tables of the money

³⁹ See Mario García, *Chicano Liberation Theology: The Writings and Documents of Richard Cruz and Católicos Por La Raza* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2009), xiv–xvii.

⁴⁰ Richard Cruz, "The Church: The Model of Hypocrisy," in *Chicano Liberation Theology*, 27.

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changers at the Temple.⁴¹ The Anglo hierarchy—like the money changers—exploited the Chicano community for money and invested in real estate and power, rather than those it presumed to serve. CPLR called the church to combat inequality in Chicano communities.⁴²

CPLR resorted to unconventional means to provoke the hierarchy's response. In November 1969, a San Diego chapter took control of a Catholic youth camp, which it occupied for days until police intervened.⁴³ Another chapter in Los Angeles pried its way into the personal study of Cardinal James McIntyre to confront the aging hierarchy, who called the police. The activists escaped, but were less fortunate a few weeks later when they disrupted the cardinal's Christmas Eve Mass at St. Basil's Catholic Church. After sneaking into the televised event and disrupting it with demands for equality, the CPLR protestors were arrested by police in full riot gear.⁴⁴ Local, regional, and national media covered the story. CPLR had poked a sore spot in the diocese's conscience.⁴⁵

Less than one month after CPLR's action, Cardinal McIntyre retired and was replaced by Archbishop Timothy Manning, whose diocesan administration was far friendlier to the Chicano movement. Mario García, a historian of the Chicano movement in the Catholic Church, argues that CPLR set the stage for the later, institution-based work of PADRES.⁴⁶ Through their disruptive protests, García claims, CPLR ignited a movement that would have long-lasting effects on the church. After the Christmas Eve action, however, CPLR's leadership became more concerned with legal defense than continuing protest. Although they organized one more protest, in which CPLR members symbolically burned their baptismal certificates, they would never reach the height of infamy that they achieved on Christmas Eve.⁴⁷ In fact, most CPLR members would never return to the church again. After the fallout from the protest, they believed the church was more an obstacle for Chicano civil rights than a resource.⁴⁸

In contrast to CPLR, PADRES became a well-established organization of increasingly powerful insiders in the US church. Like CPLR, PADRES originated in fall 1969. At that time, Ralph Ruiz, director of the Inner-City

⁴¹ Richard Cruz, "The Church and La Raza," in *Chicano Liberation Theology*, 25.

⁴² García, *Chicano Liberation Theology*, xx.

⁴³ Vince de Vaca, "The Camp Oliver Take Over," *La Verdad* (December 1969) in *Chicano Liberation Theology*, 35–37.

⁴⁴ García, *Chicano Liberation Theology*, xxi–xxvi.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

⁴⁶ Mario García, interview by author, August 9, 2016.

⁴⁷ García, *Chicano Liberation Theology*, xxvii–xxviii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xxx.

Apostolate for the Archdiocese of San Antonio, invited fellow Chicano priests to weekly meetings for mutual support. The group decided to hold a national meeting in Tucson in the spring of 1970 to confront the challenges that Chicano priests faced. The gathering established PADRES' initial priorities, including its identity as an exclusively Chicano priests' organization, its demand for Mexican American bishops, and the creation of a mobile ministry team.⁴⁹ They also discussed the need for Spanish-speaking priests, the promotion of Chicano spirituality and devotions, and seminary formation for lay and religious Chicanos.

To accomplish their goals, PADRES turned to the church hierarchy as an instrument of change. PADRES' work developed amid the worldwide explosion of liberation theologies. In the organization's early years, PADRES' leadership invited guests such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Edgar Beltran, and Paulo Freire to give workshops on conscientization, inculturated faith, and base communities. PADRES' work in liturgy, popular piety, and church representation revealed its concern for a church committed to understanding and addressing the realities that Chicanos faced.⁵⁰ As committed priests, PADRES were critical of institutionalized racism, but embraced their vocations in the church to foster dialogue. They began a successful lobbying campaign of United States bishops to create ministries for Chicano parishioners. They sent letters to the papal nuncio with lists of Chicano candidates for the episcopacy whenever a seat opened. The campaign saw immediate success when Patricio Flores, a member of PADRES, was named auxiliary bishop of San Antonio in 1971. By 1990, there were more than twenty Hispanic bishops.⁵¹ PADRES also established the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) in 1971 under the leadership of Virgilio Elizondo.⁵² Since then, MACC has fostered Mexican American theology, spirituality, and devotions. It is also a center for pastoral formation and ministry within, and on behalf of, the Chicano community.

Although many consider PADRES a successful organization, its narrow focus on institutional change and exclusivity limited its work. Much of the priests' influence derived from the fact that they were ordained. Their strict identity code—intended to create a space for Chicano leadership in the church—excluded laypeople, women, and non-Chicanos. PADRES also utilized patriarchy to further their own ends. This meant that when Las

⁴⁹ See Juan Romero, "Charism and Power: An Essay on the History of PADRES," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 9 (Winter-Spring 1990): 150–52.

⁵⁰ Richard Edward Martinez, *PADRES* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 104–6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 88–95.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 100–107.

Hermanas, a Latina Catholic women's organization, began to advocate for women's ordination, PADRES' relationship with them deteriorated.⁵³ Finally, because PADRES was so focused on a narrow vision of institutional change, the group no longer served any vital purpose after it achieved its goals.⁵⁴ Throughout the 1980s, the Vatican appointed several conservative Spanish-speaking bishops in the United States. This was a victory that PADRES celebrated but also lamented because it meant the ostracization of the Chicano movement in the Catholic Church. As one member of PADRES claims, the Vatican "beat us at our own game."⁵⁵ After a number of Hispanic ministries were created and bishops were appointed, PADRES ceased operations in 1987.

Although CPLR may seem like a failure and PADRES a success, their dissent accomplished different purposes. CPLR's activism brought immediate attention to the plight of Chicanos. Their radical activism expanded the imaginations of Chicano organizations, which could take up the community's concerns through long-term strategies for change. Likewise, although PADRES' institutional activism can be seen as a success, many Chicano priests were unwilling to challenge Catholic patriarchy or imagine how the organization could expand beyond its limited goals. The successes and failures of CPLR and PADRES were relative. In their own way, each made a contribution to the Chicano movement that was overwhelmingly transformative for the US Catholic Church.

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VI. Examining Theological Appropriations of Problematic Historical Dissent

This contribution will examine several theological methods used to understand morally egregious examples of historical dissent in the Catholic

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁴ Romero, "Charism and Power," 161–63.

⁵⁵ Vincent Lopez, quoted by Romero, "Charism and Power," 158.

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