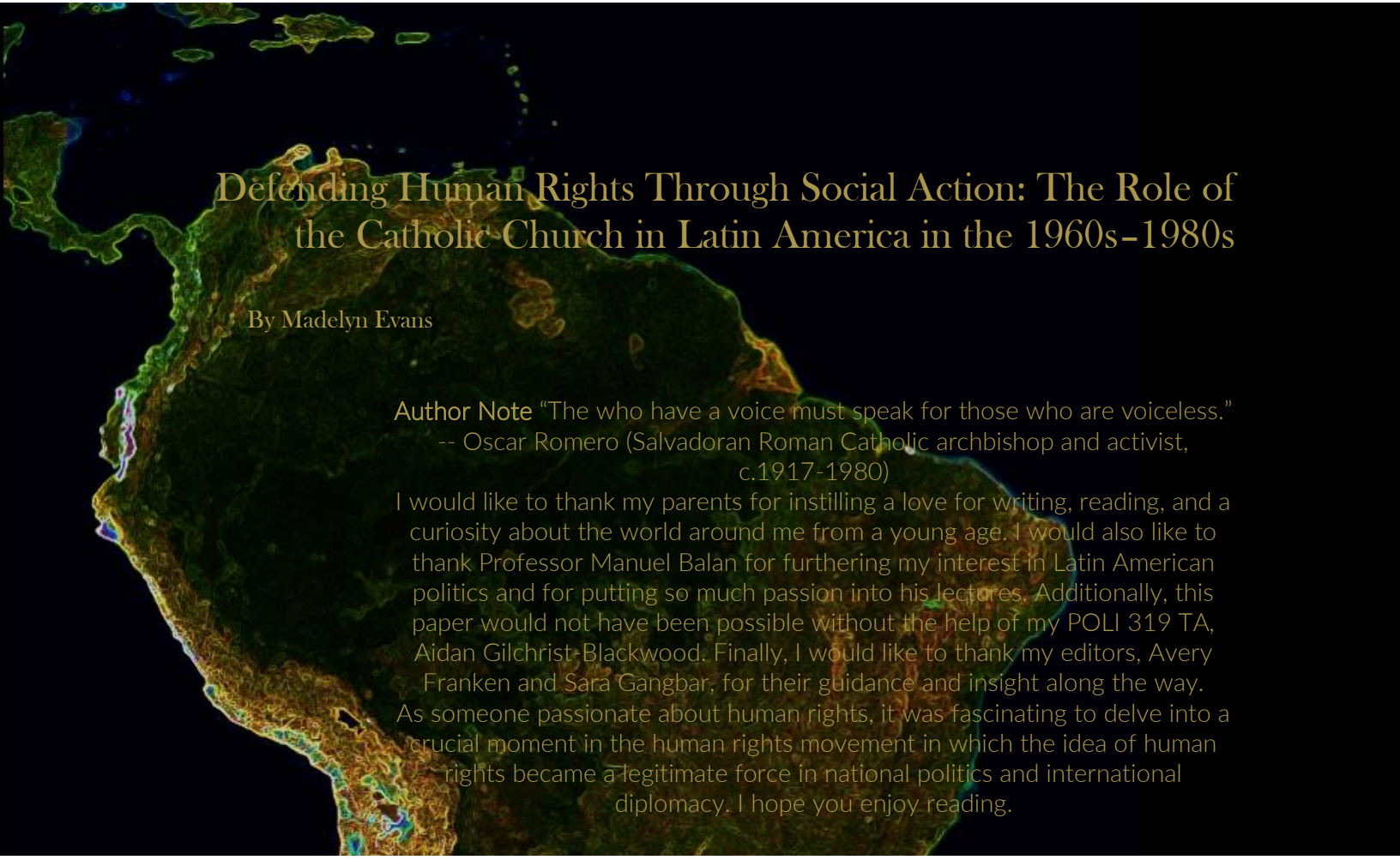

Defending Human Rights Through Social Action: The Role of the Catholic Church in Latin America in the 1960s–1980s

By Madelyn Evans

Author Note "The who have a voice must speak for those who are voiceless." -- Oscar Romero (Salvadoran Roman Catholic archbishop and activist, c.1917-1980)

I would like to thank my parents for instilling a love for writing, reading, and a curiosity about the world around me from a young age. I would also like to thank Professor Manuel Balan for furthering my interest in Latin American politics and for putting so much passion into his lectures. Additionally, this paper would not have been possible without the help of my POLI 319 TA, Aidan Gilchrist-Blackwood. Finally, I would like to thank my editors, Avery Franken and Sara Gangbar, for their guidance and insight along the way. As someone passionate about human rights, it was fascinating to delve into a crucial moment in the human rights movement in which the idea of human rights became a legitimate force in national politics and international diplomacy. I hope you enjoy reading.

Abstract Since the earliest days of colonization, religion – in particular, the Roman Catholic Church – has been a driving force in the Latin American politics, economics, and society. As the region underwent frequent political instability and high levels of violence, the Church remained a steady, powerful force in society. This paper will explore the relationship between the Catholic Church and the struggle to defend human rights during the particularly oppressive era of bureaucratic-authoritarianism in Latin America throughout the 1960s–1980s. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the Church undertook the struggle to protect human rights because its modernized social mission sought to support the oppressed suffering from the political, economic, and social status quo. In challenging the legitimacy of the ruling national security ideology and illuminating the moral dimensions of violence, the Catholic Church became a crucial constructive agent in spurring social change, mitigating the effects of violence, and setting a democratic framework for the future.

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Introduction

Since the earliest days of colonization, religion – particularly the Roman Catholic Church – has been a driving force in Latin American politics, economics, and society. Following independence in the early 1800s, the Catholic Church maintained its dominance and was established as the official religion in many countries across the region (Anderson, Ramirez, and Smith 2018). As Latin America underwent frequent political instability and high levels of violence, the Church remained a steady, powerful force in society. In the 1950s, processes of social activism began to emerge throughout Latin America, and encouragement coming from within the Church to abandon the institution's historic ties to the political and economic elite emerged (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 224). The Church's inclination to prioritize the concerns of the socially disadvantaged intensified with the wave of military-backed bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes which swept through Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. The bureaucratic-authoritarian state, composed of high-level technocrats and the upper bourgeoisie, sought to develop more stable political systems to ensure future economic progress (221). These objectives, however, were pursued in an atmosphere of severe political and social repression with little regard for the economic well-being of the poor (221). In the process of promoting political stability, regimes systematically violated an extensive spectrum of human rights by arresting, deporting, or killing anyone who opposed government policies (Smith 1979, 89). The events, which occurred under the harsh bureaucratic-authoritarian rule across Latin America, became a major focus for the emerging human rights movement, giving global prominence to issues of violence and violations of civil liberties. During this period of largely state-sponsored violence, forms of Church-based activism took on a particular urgency (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 221).

This paper explores the relationship between the Catholic Church and the struggle to defend human rights in Latin America throughout the 1960s–1980s. First, this paper analyzes the factors which spurred the Church's growing involvement in the human rights movement and renewed commitment to social justice, and explains why its impetus to take part in constructive social action can be traced to institutional changes within the Church, the emergence of Liberation Theology, and societal pressures from below. Next, this paper assesses strategies the Church employed to enact social and political change, including public condemnations at the national level through letters and position papers, Church-sponsored "base ecclesial communities," and the establishment of grassroots humanitarian social programs. Finally, this paper discusses the impacts of the Church's involvement in the human rights cause, examining how it redefined its relationship with the State, provided alternate forms of participation, and illuminated the moral dimensions of violence. Overall, this paper demonstrates that the Church undertook the struggle to protect human rights because its modernized social mission sought to support oppressed groups suffering from the political, economic, and social status quo. In challenging the legitimacy of the national security ideology and empowering the poor, the Catholic Church became a crucial constructive agent in spurring social change, mitigating the effects of violence, and setting a democratic framework for the future.

Impetus for Change: Factors for Church-Based Activism in Defense of Human Rights

Historically, in Latin America, the Catholic Church was associated with perpetuating a status quo which favoured elites. By the 1950s, however, many began to question the Church's political role as the defender of privilege (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 221). As actors within the Church began to engage with social movements, many clergy members were inspired to advocate politically on behalf of the poor (Hale 2019). The relationship which evolved between the Church and the lower socioeconomic classes of society during the authoritarian era of state violence was partly spurred by major institutional changes in the Church on an international scale. A preeminent

change was the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), held from 1962 to 1965, which addressed relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world and set the institution's course for the future (Teicher 2012). Vatican II initiated fundamental theological developments which challenged the Church to *aggiornamento* – the notion of rethinking and "bringing up to date" its religious mission concurrent with modernization (Teicher 2012). The Council's adaptation of a universal church, referring to the entire body of the Church collectively, to national and local cultures, acknowledgment of the presence of God in other religions (such as Latin America's indigenous communities), and additional reforms led to the reshaping of the Latin American religious and political landscape (Cleary and Steigenga 2004, 9). Following Vatican II, the Catholic Church adopted an active social mission and began publicly defending human rights against repressive regimes (Wilde 2016, 2). Under the influence of new pastoral ministries, missionaries, and internal reform initiated by bishops, the Catholic Church was renewed in numerous sectors (Cleary and Steigenga 2004, 8). The 1968 Medellín Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) held in Medellín, Colombia reinforced these trends (9). At Medellín, Latin American bishops pushed for an intensified engagement with secular social forces in order to "remove obstacles holding back fuller, freer lives for the majority of the region's people" (Wilde 2016, 8). As a result, millions of lay persons became more active with the Church and its social justice mission.

A second crucial factor which prompted the Church's growing involvement in the human rights movement was the emergence of Liberation Theology. Spurred by the 1968 Medellín Conference, Liberation Theology was an original body of religious thought addressing how Christians should respond to historical injustice, inequality, and poverty in the context of ongoing political violence (Wilde 2016, 8). Described as the "true inspiration for the region's human rights movement," Liberation Theology was crucial in providing the ideological foundation for religious action; it proposed that the Church, both as a people and an institution, should exert a more active role in society (Estévez 2014). Supporters of the theology advocated social action to promote justice, upholding the role of lay and clerical leadership as the basis of change (Cleary and Steigenga 2004, 9). Some based their argument for social action upon Bible scriptures that described the mission of Jesus Christ, interpreting the sacred text as a call to action against poverty to achieve Christ's mission of justice (Meredith 2016). The Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, became the theology's primary proponent, publishing his groundbreaking work entitled *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971 (Dault 2014, 46). Gutiérrez emphasized the Church's mission to support powerless individuals who lived on the margins of society and is credited for popularizing the phrase "preferential option for the poor," a central tenet of Liberation Theology (Dear 2011). The "preferential option for the poor" refers to a trend throughout biblical texts where there is a distinct preference given to the poorest individuals in society (Cleary and Steigenga 2004, 9). The Liberation Theology movement fully embraced the concept, specifically associating the plight of the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable with Jesus himself (Dault 2014, 46). Following this liberation argument, later theologians, such as Ignacio Ellacuría, advanced the idea of human rights as "rights of the poor" (Dault 2014, 46). The development of Liberation Theology was monumental because, for the first time, formal religious theology used biblical interpretation to "promote the political and social influence of the Church in the empowerment of the poor" (Singer).

The development of Liberation Theology largely influenced Latin American society. It catalyzed religious debate about violence which lead to broader social action and challenged followers of the Catholic Church to serve as "active witness[es] in a violent world" (Wilde 2016, 8). The theology created an ideological frame that both emboldened clergy to support political causes for the poor and encouraged Catholic laity to live their faith through organized social action (Hale 2019). Moreover, Liberation Theology led to the general acceptance among Church followers that

faith should take a progressive role in societies afflicted with conflict. Such activism would not only allow the faithful to embrace scripture, but also to maintain religious influence over society. Interconnected with the ideological framework created by Liberation theology are fundamental biblical tenets of Christian faith espousing nonviolence, which, in turn, necessitates religious action. In the Bible, scripture dictates "thou shalt not kill" and "blessed are the peacemakers" (Wilde 2016, 7). The Church hence felt obliged to take action against violence, poverty, and human suffering, especially as violence was perpetuated by the State. In response to the expansion of theological trends, proponents of Liberation Theology used human rights discourse to defend those tortured, detained, and kidnapped under the regimes of Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Bolivia, as well as other countries (Estévez 2014). Overall, it is evident that the remarkable growth and influence of Liberation Theology served as an ideological foundation and catalyst for religious action.

A final crucial factor which spurred Church-based activism was the need to meet popular dissatisfaction with the status quo. Although the policy of promoting human rights was legitimized in the Medellín documents of 1968, the agenda for human rights did not become a conscious priority of the Church's national hierarchies until they were compelled to act by pressures from below (Smith 1979, 116). Such pressure came from base-level activism among lower churches and from outside ecclesiastical institutions (116). Though the Church's "preferential option for the poor" provided the theoretical foundations for supporting the underprivileged, the Church's priorities shifted to more closely identify with the lower classes when the poor placed urgent demands on the Church's time and resources. Under authoritarian regimes throughout the period, there were abrupt economic changes as Latin American states pushed for nationalization efforts, such as import substitution industrialization, to create economic systems independent from the global economy (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 221). The effects of such rapid economic changes disproportionately impacted the poor, increasing their demands for political and social reform (Singer). The Church acted in response to public pressure because many impoverished members of society had nowhere else to go for aid (Smith 1979, 116). In the context of a repressive society, churches were one of the last remaining organizations with any relative degree of freedom to act because authoritarian rulers found it particularly difficult to suppress religious identities, movements, and associations (Mantilla 2016, 272). Furthermore, the lower classes demonstrated the greatest willingness to participate in the Church's new evangelical efforts, offering the Church opportunities to enhance its institutional power by aiding them (Smith 1979, 119). The cause for human rights, including the protection of basic civil and political rights, was highly relevant in society, particularly in the context of severe repression. The Church promoted "human rights" as a broad ideal which encompassed social, economic, and cultural dimensions—all the rights they deemed necessary for the "fuller life that God intended for humanity" (Wilde 2016, 11). Advocating for the protection of human rights became a new priority for the Church and allowed them to maintain a say in political matters. By involving itself in the human rights cause, the Church could uphold its relevance in ordinary people's lives. Hence, in the context of the abrupt changes occurring throughout Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, the Church needed to continue addressing the needs of its followers to ensure that it remained a predominant force in society (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 227).

Addressing Violence and Injustices in Society: The Strategies of the Church

After adopting its new active social mission in defense of human rights, the Catholic Church employed various strategies to spur political, economic, and social changes to the status quo. To address different forms of violence in society, the Church utilized public condemnations both to criticize governments' social and economic policies and to disclose their human rights

violations. At the 1968 CELAM conference, bishops proposed the theological/pastoral method "to see, to judge, to act" as a primary strategy to spread the Catholic faith and meet the social, economic, and political needs of their followers (De La Torre 2009, 114). Inspired by the methodology, Catholic bishops and priests took public stands against human rights injustices and abuses of power at the national level (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 222). Members of the clergy exposed the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes through the wide distribution of statements, letters, and position papers which highlighted the injustices committed. Pastoral letters of bishops in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, for example, emphasized the "connection between violation[s] of classic civil rights and the desire upon the part of wealthy elites to preserve their economic power" (Smith 1979, 90). These letters blamed those who benefited from military rule at the root of the problems disadvantaging the poor. They also denounced crimes committed under military regimes, including murder, torture, kidnapping, and the denial of rights to a fair trial and habeas corpus. In distributing these letters, bishops underscored what they believed were the deeper underlying causes of the unjust economic structures, maldistribution of land and wealth, and systematic violations of human rights. Through the dissemination of information, bishops were empowered to criticize the pervasiveness of the era's ideology of national security which subjugated the rights of citizens to the dominance of the State. (90)

The tactic of episcopal and pastoral letters was also utilized to articulate the Church's call for social and economic change. Episcopal letters urged secular leaders to redistribute land and economic resources, respect independent labor unions, and fairly apply the law to limit government power (90). Catholic leaders identified with the plight of the poor, vigorously defending the rights of those violated and imploring existing governments and landed elites to enact change (90). In addition to public statements and letters, the Church's "see-judge-act" method was underscored by the establishment of research centers and intellectual networking among pastoral agents across the region (De La Torre 2009, 114). Church bodies produced research which publicly exposed the defections and harm caused by government action and inaction (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 222). In utilizing widely distributed rhetoric to enact social change, the Church exposed the systematic violations of human rights committed under political regimes and the inherent flaws within their institutional structures.

Church-sponsored mass movements, known as "base ecclesial communities" (*comunidades eclesiales de base* or CEBs), were another key strategy used to enact social and political change (De La Torre 2009, 114). In essence, base ecclesial communities were transnational religious associations engaged in various devotional practices and enable their members to "live out their Christian faith more fully in the world" (Smith 1979, 122). Though not fundamentally created for political purposes, these organizations had profound sociopolitical implications for the societies where they operated. Many CEBs throughout the 1970s and 1980s were involved in collective political activism, including workers' strikes, mass rallies, and petitioning campaigns to improve the local quality of life (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 224). The rise of CEBs can be traced to the early 1960s, in the midst of the new, socially progressive Church teachings emerging from the Second Vatican Council which drew attention to the problems facing the lowest social classes (Beezley and Ewell 2001, 240). The importance of CEBs' role in society was reaffirmed at subsequent episcopal meetings in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico in 1979 (241).

At the heyday of the CEB phenomenon (during the late 1970s and early 1980s), there were approximately "3 to 4 million people active in many tens of thousands of these groups" across the region's rural areas and urban outskirts (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 224). The extent of the CEBs across Latin America reflected the desire for political expression among the poor and oppressed. Following 1960, after the military seized power in multiple countries and cut off

traditional avenues of protest, the lower classes increasingly looked to the Church for guidance and protection (Beezley and Ewell 2001, 241). To address their grievances, the Church offered the CEBs as spaces where the poor could voice their dissatisfaction with repressive government policies without fear of persecution. Linked to what was described as a "culture of repression" was the notion that many in Latin American society, particularly the lower classes, remained disengaged from politics because they believed their involvement would make no difference (Smith 1994, 123). In an atmosphere where many had become disenchanted with politics, cynical about government corruption, and fearful of state-sponsored violence, CEBs fostered a critical "attitude of engaged criticism" (122). CEBs thus served as a vital force for institutional activism, giving a voice to those previously excluded from a restrictive political arena.

A final tactic the Catholic Church employed to address human rights was the establishment of grassroots social programs and humanitarian aid efforts. Starting in the early 1970s, churches across Latin America created social and pastoral programs to respond to the needs of those who bore the brunt of repression under military dictatorships (Smith 1979, 91). Church-sponsored organizations focused on the promotion of human rights, carrying out both legal and humanitarian functions. Programs funded by the Church bolstered the defense of classic civil rights, including "the right of habeas corpus, the right to a fair trial, [and] the right to be protected against torture" (117). Church services also aided in improving the living conditions in jails, including permitting prison visits, enhancing communication between detainees and their families, and providing medicine, clothing, and food for relatives of prisoners (117). In Northeastern Brazil, a region well-regarded for its grassroots self-help programs, Archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara founded "Operation Hope" in 1967 (122). The agency sponsored projects in literacy training, health, housing, and recreation across thirteen urban and rural communities in the Recife-Olinda diocese, demonstrating the importance of such initiatives (122).

The Church also supported the lower classes by funding various regional agencies and commissions. In Brazil, for example, the Church supported agencies protecting specific interest groups, including the Pastoral Land Commission, the Indigenous Missionary Council, and the Peace and Justice Commission (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 224). In Chile, the Committee of Cooperation for Peace was formed in 1973 as the first active human rights organization in the country. The Committee established a wide range of services for those suffering under General Augusto Pinochet's military regime, including soup kitchens in urban working-class areas, assistance to arbitrarily dismissed workers, self-help projects for the unemployed, and medical aid in areas lacking public health clinics (Smith 1979, 122). Between 1973 and 1975, the Committee for Peace sponsored over 100,000 people in need of legal, medical, or economic assistance (122). In each of these countries, the new Church-sponsored programs were sustained through the financial and material support provided by churches across Western Europe and the United States. International networks along with grassroots efforts facilitated a transfer both of aid and information regarding the extent of the human rights violations. The international network of churches thus gave the Catholic Church in Latin America an important capacity for action to defend human rights through its humanitarian efforts (116).

Impacts and Implications of the Church's Active Defense of Human Rights

The Catholic Church's robust expansion into social and political issues throughout the 1960s–1980s, after its renewed mission of social justice, left several lasting legacies. One of the most significant implications of the Church's social actions was that it redefined the Church's relationship with the State. By denouncing violent acts perpetrated by state agents as violations of fundamental human rights, the Church refused to legitimize the regimes, arguing that the State was not upholding its intrinsic responsibility to protect legally-enshrined liberties (Wilde 2016, 7).

Furthermore, the commitment to modernize its religious mission at Vatican II and the emergence of Liberation Theology encouraged a break from elitist notions of the Church and instead promoted the prioritization of the lower classes (Singer). Liberation Theology associated itself with the plight of the impoverished, and in promoting the poor's interests in the Church's religious, social, and political agenda, both the relationship between the Church and the State *and* the Church and the people were dramatically transformed (Singer). In the context of the intensifying repression under the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, the Church felt obliged to address violence because it was the State perpetrating it. Bishops, pastors, and other religious figures explicitly condemned governments' economic and political policies and exposed the injustices they orchestrated. In some cases, national churches went so far as to commit themselves institutionally to an oppositional stance against the State (Daudelin and Hewitt 1995, 221). In retaliation, military regimes jailed, deported, or murdered many who opposed the government's policies, including those within the Church (221). The Church's various forms of religious activism and criticism—and the government's response to it—strained the relationship between the institutional Church and the State "to the breaking point," a transformation which left lasting implications (221).

Another significant impact of the Church's social involvement was its success in providing alternate forms of participation at the domestic level. The base ecclesial communities and other lay training programs served as "social incubators" for future generations of leaders among the lower classes (Smith 1979, 118). Not only did these associations offer opportunities for oppressed members of society to participate in the Church's mission, but they also provided the poor with a sense of hope and solidarity (118). These organizations nourished "a critical consciousness" as well as a "spirit of resistance" among peasants, laborers, and Indigenous people – a development which was crucial in setting the stage for future social and political engagement (118). The CEBs also empowered members to develop their organizational, communication, and leadership skills, providing the experience necessary for future political mobilization (Smith 1994, 124). The proliferation of these associations among civil society contributed to the bottom-up process of democratization which would occur in Latin America over the next several decades. Overall, the alternate forms of participation created by the Church successfully alleviated the impact of repression generated by military regimes and, simultaneously, laid the foundations for eventual structural transformations towards democratization (Smith 1979, 118).

A final crucial impact to address was the Church's role in illuminating the moral dimensions of violence through its defense of human rights, which, in turn, challenged the legitimacy of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes' national security ideology. The sociopolitical circumstances of Latin America in the 1960s to 1980s gave the Church a new way to understand and address violence (Wilde 2016, 6). As a region of primary focus for the global human rights movement, churches across Latin America served as significant actors in legitimating the notion of human rights and establishing methods to address and protect them (6). Thus, one of the most profound ways in which the Church influenced society throughout the era of bureaucratic-authoritarianism lies at the deeper ideological level. In providing an alternative moral perspective and force, the Catholic Church challenged the legitimacy of the national security ideology— an ideology underlying the systemic violence and human rights violations during the era (Smith 1979, 118). The Church accepted that certain values – those rights "fundamental to human life, universal and inherent in the human condition" – should be enshrined in law (Wilde 2016, 7). The grounding of human rights in law implicitly carried with it a moral commitment to nonviolence (7). Though the Church made similar theological and moral appeals before, their involvement in the human rights cause was transformative in that it called for concrete means of protecting such rights via laws

and legal institutions. The Church, therefore, played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for future political shifts in the region.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the human rights movement in Latin America during the era of bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes was examined. In assessing the factors which spurred the Church's sociopolitical involvement, the Church's renewed commitment to take part in social action was traced to institutional changes within the Church, the development of Liberation Theology, and pressures to respond to popular dissatisfaction among the poor. The methods the Church used to enact social and political change were also examined, including public denunciations of the regimes' injustices, the widely influential base ecclesial communities, and the funding of humanitarian programs aimed at underprivileged members of society. Finally, the impacts of the religious institution's embrace of human rights were assessed, including the implications of the Church's redefined relationship with the State, the opening of civil society through alternate forms of political participation, and the Church's moral success in challenging the legitimacy of the regimes' national security ideology. Above all, it is evident that in modernizing its social mission, the Church and its internal agents were empowered to embrace the plight of the lower classes. By responding to the state-sponsored violence of the various military dictatorships in defense of the people, the Church served as a catalyzing force in the human rights cause. The violations of basic civil and political rights endemic throughout the 1960s–1980s remain a relevant and pressing concern in Latin America today. The advancement of human rights, though of less focus for religious advocacy groups now than in the past, persists as a necessary cause in conflict-plagued societies. Although the Church has adapted its approaches throughout history, progressive Catholic activists continue to embrace human rights as a touchstone in addressing conflict and violence. It is important to note that the role of the Catholic Church cannot be generalized across Latin American society as a solely positive force; its conservative branch still pushes a hardline agenda on issues of sex, sexuality, and reproductive rights. However, in civil society, Church-linked actors remain active in the lives of citizens through ecumenical efforts to educate people – especially women, rural populations, and indigenous communities – about their rights (Wilde 2016, 11). Thus, in spite of the wrenching changes the region has endured over the last half-century, the Catholic Church remains an influential presence in Latin America. In the years to come, the world will witness the Church's potential to continue evolving and embracing social action for a more just, peaceful, and democratic society.

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