

Leaders and Ideas in Social Movements: One Priest in El Salvador's Revolutionary Movement

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This paper highlights two key aspects of social movement theory – the role of ideas and of leaders. First, I look at the salience of ideas that create an insurgent consciousness not only on the part of the popular base of movements but on the leaders as well. Again, social movement scholars certainly focus on ideas, but their focus often centers on the attitudinal changes of workers or the peasantry rather than the attitudinal changes of the leaders of movements. Second, I examine the importance of leadership in the emergence of the popular, particularly peasant, movement in El Salvador in the 1970s. Although leadership has certainly been a focus of social movement theory, more likely than not, scholars view social movements as grassroots constructions rather than the result of the efforts of leaders.

I use the life story of one Salvadoran diocesan priest, David Rodriguez, to highlight the importance of leadership and ideas because without the contentiousness of the Catholic Church in El Salvador the popular movement may never have attained the strength and size that it did in the 1970s.¹ It was the strength of this movement that provided the backbone for the powerful revolutionary movement that almost brought down the Salvadoran state in the 1980s. Padre David, as he is still known today, was one of the pioneers of the new pastoral in El Salvador that emerged in 1970, yet he is not nearly as well known outside of El Salvador as other priests, such as Rutilio Grande and Jose “Chencho” Alas, or, of course, Archbishop Oscar Romero. Nevertheless, Padre David was at the forefront of the powerful peasant movement that eventually threatened the state with its very survival. After conducting extensive interviews with Padre David and with over 70 people who have known him, I find that his “conversion” and his subsequent efforts at peasant organization and mobilization for political action were crucial for the development of El Salvador’s popular movement in the 1970s.

Social Movement Theory

Rather than reviewing the extensive literature on social movements, I will focus on the importance of ideas and leaders. The literatures on revolution and social movements have shown that socioeconomic conditions alone do not result in contention and rebellion. While revolutions are not likely in affluent societies, the poorest most marginalized people seldom rebel and when they do it seems clear that stimuli other than poverty and economic marginalization are at work. Smith, using McAdams’ political process model, PPM, (1996) as a guide, argues that, during the rise of liberation theology in Latin America, social movements emerged in countries where political opportunities, organizational strength and insurgent consciousness were present (Smith 1991). In the PPM, leaders are considered simply as an element of organizational strength rather than the principal element in the development of contentious politics. And the model sees insurgent consciousness as principally an attribute of the people who rebel, rather than the construct of leaders who then convey these attitudes to the masses.

¹ This paper is based on about 50 hours of recorded interviews with David Rodriguez, conducted in May 2007; about 35 hours of recorded interviews with 75 people who have known David conducted in El Salvador in January 2008; and over 200 documents from the Parish of Tecoluca, covering the years 1972-1977.

I argue, however, that the contentious peasant movement that emerged in El Salvador in the early 1970s, that contributed greatly to the strong popular movements of the late 1970s, and that provided most of the recruits for the revolutionary movement in the 1980s, was first and foremost the product of ideational changes in the Salvadoran Catholic church that led priests and nuns to mobilize lay church workers, allowing them to challenge the state and demand their constitutional rights. The work of church leaders helped to create contentious peasants who later became rebellious peasants. No doubt, economic misery and frustration with the political process played strong roles in the development of contentiousness in El Salvador in the 1970s, however, it was the change in Church doctrine in the late 1960s and the priests and nuns who embraced that doctrine that provided the impetus for the peasant mobilization that emerged in the 1970s. Several studies have highlighted the important role of the church in the social movements of Latin American and El Salvador in the 1980s (See for example, Lernoux 1982; Berryman 1984; Cleary 1985; Levine 1986; Montgomery 1983; Smith 1991; Peterson 1997), but this study highlights the importance of religious doctrinal change and its effects on Church leaders who were the key catalysts for social mobilization.

Much of the literature on the Church's role in Latin America has rightly identified the doctrinal changes that occurred during the Second Vatican Council and the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Colombia in 1968, as representing a revolutionary change in Catholicism. While these changes were quite complex, the "preferential option for the poor" has been identified as perhaps the simplest way to summarize the importance of the changes. In the 1960s, the Catholic Church chose to disassociate itself with the elite, with which it had been aligned since the colonial period, and align itself at least doctrinally with the interests of the poor. While many bishops and clergy took these doctrinal changes lightly, by either rejecting outright the new approach or supporting it only superficially, others embraced them wholeheartedly and began to quickly put them into practice. In El Salvador, a number of clergy, nuns, and two bishops became committed to promoting the interests of the poor relatively soon after the 1968 meeting in Medellin. They began to create Christian base communities, training centers, and some even assisted the poor in forming popular organizations (See Alas 2003).

Those studies that emphasize the actions of priests and nuns as leaders, however, have a relatively paternalistic view of the process, mostly labeling the process consciousness-raising (*concientización*). The most common view suggests that peasants, who were steeped in fatalism, had their "eyes opened" or "were awaked" by priests and nuns who helped them see their economic plight. Certainly, priests and nuns did indeed help peasants to read and to interpret the world in a relatively sophisticated manner, mostly using bible verses, class analysis and dependency theory. Additionally, once the poor were poised to demand their rights, the church helped them to organize and served as an influential partner. Nevertheless, this view is highly paternalistic and is almost the mirror image of the opposite view that sees the peasant movement in El Salvador as the product almost solely of peasant initiative and organization. The answer is most likely found in the middle of these two perspectives. Peasants decided to mobilize after priests and nuns embraced the preferential option for the poor, later termed Liberation Theology,

and thus Catholic Church leadership served as one of the key catalysts for peasant organization.² However, peasants rebelled perhaps not because their eyes were opened but because they realized that for the first time in their lives they had a strong ally and thus rebellion might be possible. Rather than behaving emotionally peasants most likely made a rational calculation about their chances for success and decided that with priests and nuns on their side their efforts at achieving a better life were now more likely to succeed. In the early 1930s, peasants had rebelled with the help of the newly formed communist party, and the result had been a massacre (*matanza*) of about 10,000 mostly indigenous Salvadorans. Peasants were quite rational in the ensuing years by staying passive in an adverse political and economic context.

I would argue that based on the experiences of Father David Rodriguez, the following causal chain can best explain the rise of the peasant movement in El Salvador in the 1970s. The Catholic Church is challenged by Protestantism and secular organization such as labor organizations and peasant organizations that are inspired by socialist or Marxist parties (I will not be able to develop this argument in this paper). While experiencing these challenges, many priests and nuns are making the decision to leave their calling. These challenges represent a severe crisis for the Catholic Church as an institution since the largest Catholic population in the world is in Latin America. The hierarchical Church then decides to become more in tune with the real world and the plight of the poor who are most susceptible to the claims made by Protestants and Marxists. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), but specifically one of the church constitutions it produced *Gadium et Spes*, and the Second meeting of the Episcopal Council of Latin American Bishops (1968), at Medellin, Colombia, represent the institutional and doctrinal manifestations of the church's dramatic change in doctrine. Within two years in El Salvador, a new pastoral mission is put in place by those priests who embrace the new approach. This new approach "awakens" workers and peasants, who then, with the help of the Church, begin to form popular organizations. Once the genie is out of the bottle and the Salvadoran state begins to repress popular organizations, the small, poorly funded Marxist/Nationalist revolutionary groups that had also emerged in the early 1970s, embrace the popular organizations and thus have sufficient recruits and experienced leaders to challenge the state in the 1980s. The strength of the opposition is so strong that only extensive and prolonged US economic and military assistance is able to keep the Salvadoran state from succumbing to the insurgents who have extensive popular support. The outcome is a military stalemate that ends only after negotiations brokered by the United Nations.

Father Jose David Rodriguez Rivera: Leader and maker of leaders

Jose David Rodriguez Rivera was born in 1940 to a land owning, relatively wealthy family in the department of San Vicente, where some of El Salvador's wealthiest families had cotton plantations, coffee *fincas* and cattle ranches. David's family grew sugar cane and had a small mill that produced sugar and other cane products. The

² No doubt, other groups and their leaders were instrumental in organizing and mobilizing the poor of El Salvador, including teachers, students, workers, and revolutionary organizations. However, the Catholic Church was a major force in El Salvador and had resources, respected leaders, and a God on their side.

family's plantation was in Calderas a small community in the municipality of Apastepeque, which is just north east of San Vicente, the capital of the department with the same name. The department's geography is dominated by the large San Vicente volcano, also known as Chinchontepeque, which can be seen almost everywhere in the department.

David's father, Lisandro, was a very religious man who valued education greatly. He sent David to school in Apastepeque's Urban Boy's School "Agustin Sanchez," where he lived and worked at the local parish while he completed his primary education. From very early on David exhibited tremendous potential and was allowed to skip a grade. After finishing sixth grade, in 1950, David went to study at the Minor Seminary Pio XII in the city of San Vicente. The seminary had been founded recently by the bishop of San Vicente, Pedro Arnoldo Aparicio y Quintanilla. Here David remained until completing secondary school, at the School Santo Tomas, and completing his preliminary religious studies at the Pio XII Seminary, graduating in 1955. Few of the young seminarians at this stage would continue their religious training, but owing to his father's influence and his personal desires, David continued his religious training with the aim of being ordained a priest. In 1956, he entered the Major Seminary "San Jose de la Montaña," in San Salvador, the country's capitol. The Jesuit order had established this "prestigious" seminary to provide religious training to men from all of Central America. In December 1963, Padre David Rodriguez was ordained a priest and held his first mass on January 6, 1964, in Apastepeque, much to the delight of his mother and father.³ Owing to his recognized potential, David was awarded a scholarship to study canonical law at the Pontifical University in Madrid, Spain. From September 1964 to June 1966 he worked towards a degree in canonical law at the university known as *Comillas*. Padre David, was selected to attend Nuncio School in Rome, but returned to El Salvador to take charge of a parish because Bishop Aparicio insisted that he needed his young priest. Padre David was a homegrown priest, in a country where half the priests were foreign, mostly from Spain, Italy, or Belgium.

David's first few years as a priest were calm and full of potential for the young cleric to rise in the hierarchy. His first parish, assigned to him in 1966, was in a small town called Santo Domingo, not far from Apastepeque. Bishop Aparicio also made him chaplain of the Divine Savior of the World School run by the sisters of the congregation founded by the bishop. He was also given the charge of chaplain to the 5th infantry brigade, headquartered near the city of San Vicente. The army gave David the rank of captain. Finally, the bishop also made David his personal secretary.

At this point David's relationship with Bishop Aparicio was quite good since the Bishop saw him as an accomplished, well-educated young priest who had potential to advance in the church. In 1968, Padre David was transferred to the parish of the Church of Pilar in the city of San Vicente, a considerably more prestigious assignment, where he continued the additional duties he had been assigned in Santo Domingo. Then very quickly Bishop Aparicio moved David to the parish of Tecoluca, a provincial town, close to San Vicente. David's new parish was geographically large and included a number of

³ Since David was not yet 24 years of age, his bishop had to obtain special approval for his ordination.

extensive haciendas and fincas; and thus this new parish brought in a lot of money for the church. Since David served as the 5th Brigade's chaplain, he travelled with the brigade when El Salvador went to war with Honduras in July 1969.

David at the end of 1969 could be seen as the perfect model for a Salvadoran priest who would go on to become a bishop and even archbishop at a relatively early age. His bishop was powerful within the Salvadoran hierarchy and David served as his personal secretary. David even concedes that at the time he was "quite conservative," since the winds of doctrinal change from Vatican II and Medellin had yet to hit El Salvador. Soon, however, at the parish of Tecoluca, David would become a household name in El Salvador. Archbishop Oscar Romero would become known world wide, especially after his assassination in March 1980. Rutilio Grande would become known to those who study or care about Latin America after his murder in 1977. However, Padre David would not reach the notoriety of other Catholic priests, mostly because he was not murdered, but also because he would join a guerrilla organization and enter a clandestine life in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, he has been identified by quite a few scholars who study El Salvador and was also wrongly credited in a *New York Times* article as having led a guerrilla force of 1,500 in the takeover of a small town in 1983 (*New York Times*, November 1, 1983, Section A, page 3). Berryman quotes a progressive priest as saying that David was "a great theologian although he has no academic degree, a prophet ... a joyful peasant priest, the most persecuted ... the 'Che' of the Bible ... (1984, 106)."

Indeed, Padre David would be one of the priests at the epicenter of the social earthquake that would hit El Salvador. He would embrace the preferential option for the poor, would embrace liberation theology and its preference for socialism, and would eventually join the largest "politico-military" insurgent organization in El Salvador, the FPL (*Fuerzas Populares de Liberacion – Farabundo Marti*), which would eventually become the largest guerrilla organization within the FMLN (the Farbundo Marti National Liberation Front).

Doctrinal Change Comes to El Salvador: The First Pastoral Week of 1970

In January of 1970, Padre Juan Macho, a Spanish priest of the Passionist order who worked in the parish of Jiquilisco adjacent to Tecoluca, invited David to participate in a unique gathering in El Salvador called First Week of Pastoral Reflection, a gathering of religious leaders for the purpose of reflecting on the pronouncements of Vatican II and Medellin. The Pastoral Week, sponsored by the archdiocese, was held because El Salvador's archbishop, Monseñor Luis Chavez y Gonzalez and his auxiliary Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas were receptive to the changes proposed by Vatican II and the Medellin conference of bishops (Hammond 1998, 28; Montgomery 1983, 70).⁴ This "week of reflection" was held in San Salvador, and brought together the most progressive Catholics in the country -- a total of 180 individuals, including 83 priests, 30 nuns, 2 religious men, and 33 lay persons (Cardenal 1985, 146). The pastoral week resulted in

⁴ Chavez y Gonzalez was Archbishop for 40 years (1938-1977). He allowed the *Semana Pastoral* to take place in 1970 and also encouraged Salvadoran priests to study abroad.

three principal conclusions: to work toward the creation and consolidation of ecclesiastical base communities; to work at promoting and training lay leaders; to build, develop and strengthen the cooperation of parishes and priests, which became known as the “joint pastoral” (*pastoral en conjunto*). As David recalls: “I came out [of this meeting] charged up, very enthused!” David recalls that after the pastoral week, the progressives in the church became convinced that “the church had to help the peasants to liberate themselves from the oppression in which they found themselves.” The priests and nuns who attended this watershed event were committed to bringing substantial changes to El Salvador by empowering the poor via the leadership of priests and lay workers.

Along with the pastoral week, in 1970, a number of progressive priests began to hold regular, almost monthly meetings. Two foreign priests were instrumental in establishing these meetings, the Spaniard Juan Macho and Bernardo Boulang, from France. Both priests helped to bring the Church’s doctrinal changes to El Salvador. David also joined this group, which was eventually referred to as *La Nacional*. One conservative priest, Freddy Delgado later accused La Nacional of serving as the group that gave birth to the “popular church” in El Salvador. For Delgado and other conservatives, like Bishop Aparicio, this group of priests and the “popular church,” which emerged soon after the murder of Archbishop Romero, were nothing more than proponents of communism and responsible for all of the country’s problems (Delgado 1982).⁵

The Pastoral Week was like a volcanic eruption in El Salvador whose lava covered the entire church and country. Those priests and nuns who embraced the call for a new pastoral with a preferential option for the poor began to set up Christian base communities, teach poor people to read using Bible verses that highlighted Jesus’ preference for the poor, and establish training centers so that peasants and workers could gain skills and knowledge with which they could advance their economic and political interests. David as one of the priests who became “converted” by the new pastoral, did all of these things with unbounded enthusiasm. In just a few years, El Salvador’s hugely powerful, popular movement would be born. And in just a few years, on August 2, 1975, progressive priests and nuns “occupied” the Cathedral in San Salvador for the first time in the country’s history as a form of protest. The seizing of the Cathedral, precipitated by the massacre of students in July who demonstrated against the Miss Universe pageant being held in El Salvador, was decided upon at a meeting of La Nacional and some recall that the idea was proposed by David Rodriguez and Chenco Alas at the meeting.⁶ The BPR became the largest of the five popular blocks, linked with armed, “politico-military” organizations, in El Salvador. The BPR was aligned with the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberacion* (FPL - Farabundo Marti) an organization that David joined in late 1974 after six peasants of his parish were murdered by the National Guard.

The Parish of Tecoluca: Home of the Social Volcano

⁵ In his brief diatribe against the progressive elements of the church, Delgado even suggests that the guerrilla organizations were responsible for Romero’s murder.

⁶ In a personal interview, Alas said that he couldn’t really remember whether it was his or David’s idea to take over the Cathedral but that both of them certainly spoke strongly in favor of this bold act.

With the inauguration of the new pastoral, many priests and nuns, including of course David, began to not only empathize with the campesino but also to become their advocates. Since the campesinos had nowhere to turn, David began to actively promote their interests. David's willingness to better serve the campesino by offering masses, baptisms, and marriages, at little or no cost, was not necessarily seen as a bad thing by the landowners, although some were suspicious of his actions. However, once David began to serve as an advocate for the campesino, his relationship with landowners deteriorated rapidly. David comments: "All of the problems with the landowners occurred in [19]71 ... yes it was 70 or 71." Thus, while David experienced some problems prior to the Semana Pastoral, it was only after the Salvadoran Church, led by Archbishop Chavez y Gonzalez, decided to work toward applying Vatican II and Medellin to its pastoral work that David began to experience serious clashes with the landowners in his parish.

One particularly intense conflict arose at a large hacienda about 10 kilometers south of Tecoluca disparagingly called "la chenga sola." Peasants called tortillas "chengas" and the name stuck because at this hacienda the workers would get tortillas only, with no beans or cheese. The hacienda's real name was San Luis Las Posadas. Every year, on a weekend as close to 15 May as possible, the patron saint of Isidro Labrador would be celebrated at the hacienda "with much pomp." The hacienda was owned by "a very strong woman who rode horses." The first time he said mass at the celebration, soon after his arrival in Tecoluca, David gave a sermon in which he talked about San Isidro Labrador. The owner was very pleased with the sermon and told David that in the past priests had never really expounded upon the life of the saint. The second time, however, in 1970, and four months after he attended the first pastoral week, David clashed with the owner, Señora Rosales. After the mass, she asked David to bless the *potreros* (water troughs). "How is that done?" David asked with some amazement. "The priest from Zacatecoluca, when he came, would get on the jeep [with me] and bless the potreros," she replied matter-of-factly. David, quickly thinking on his feet, responded by saying, "Fine, fine, I can do that. But let's make a deal. Why don't you give the campesinos something with their tortillas and I'll bless the potreros?" Rosales became furious at David's proposal, responding, "in my hacienda no one comes to give orders; you in your church and me in my hacienda!" David responded, "well, then, I'm not going to bless the potreros." David never returned to the hacienda (the owner barred him from entering) but heard people comment that Mrs. Rosales was commenting to people: "that priest is a communist." David recalls that this "was the first time" that he heard that people were calling him a communist. At the time he did not understand, and would say "why do they say I'm a communist?" From David's perspective he was simply following the new pastoral expressed by Medellin and promoted by the first pastoral week. In fact, at the time, he saw himself as solidly anti-socialist.

David experienced another dramatic break with a landowner at a large hacienda called Santa Teresa, owned by Dr. Rafael Carballo, who at the time, and ironically, was Minister of Justice. The hacienda was mainly a cattle ranch but cotton and grains were also grown. The hacienda also contained a "large, beautiful" chapel. Typically, large haciendas and plantations would have both a small church (*ermita*) and a National Guard

or Hacienda Police outpost at the core buildings, or *casco*, of the property. In essence, the landowner had at his property symbols of both church and state. David points out that traditionally “the local priest was very helpful to the land-owners (patrones)” since they would say to the campesinos “suffer with patience, and God will give you the prize in the next life.” Priests would normally develop good relationships with the landowners since they and the church depended greatly upon their charity (money).

David developed an especially close relationship with Dr. Carballo since both of them played classical guitar. The Minister was an “excellent classical guitarist,” while David played mainly popular music but had taken classical guitar lessons when he studied in Spain. Eventually, via their love for music and the guitar, the two men became “good friends.” One day after mass, some campesinos told David, “Look, Dr. Carballo has closed the river off to us.” The campesinos that lived in a splay of houses, a *caserio*, by a river planted vegetables and corn and used the water from the river for their meager crops. The campesinos also used a road that went through the Santa Teresa hacienda to get to Tecoluca, and Dr. Carballo had also locked the gate that was at the road, meaning that the campesinos now had to take a different, much longer path. David, confident in his friendship with Dr. Carballo, quickly responded “There is no problem; I will speak with him; we are friends.”

When David conveyed the concerns of the campesinos to Dr. Carballo, the Minister was very dismissive and spoke to David as if he were a child: “Enough, you are getting into problems; you are too young, learn to live.” Once finished, Dr. Carballo wrote a check to David for twice the normal amount. Recognizing that this action smelled like a bribe, David returned the check to him and said he would not accept this atypical contribution, adding that what he wanted was for the Minister to resolve the campesino’s problems by granting them access to water and to the barred road. Carballo then became “furious” and said to David, “don’t come back to my finca.” David never returned to Dr. Carballo’s hacienda, signifying a permanent, serious rift between him and the landowner. After he told the campesinos that the minister was not going to help them and that he would not be saying mass at the hacienda again, David told the campesinos that he would come back and say mass for them outside the minister’s property. When he returned 15 days later, David said mass outdoors at the small *caserio* near the hacienda, representing in the eyes of the land-owner an act of defiance. In essence a local priest was taking an act that went against hundreds of years of tradition: saying a mass outside of a church or *ermita* for the benefit of the poor.

In April 1972, David was invited to and attended another gathering that would solidify his commitment to the principles of liberation theology and to bringing about revolutionary, and more precisely, socialist change to El Salvador. Father Bernardo Boulang invited David to participate in the “First International Encounter of Christians for Socialism,” held in Santiago, Chile. Boulang had visited David’s parish in Tecoluca after the pastoral week and David recalls that Boulang had helped his parish to more effectively relate the bible to El Salvador’s reality. Boulang also helped David with the methodology of selecting the “most committed lay leaders,” and with establishing the first seminar for those young leaders in Tecoluca. Interestingly enough, the first seminar

was held in a house in Tecoluca of a large land-owner who later became minister of agriculture.⁷ Since he seldom used the house, the land-owner allowed David to use the house for the course. The course began on a Friday afternoon and ended Sunday in the middle of the day with a special mass. The purpose of the course was to “form” young, lay leaders who would become Delegates of the Word by helping them “at a deeper level” to relate the Bible to the “reality” in Tecoluca and El Salvador. The attendees, David recalls, “left the course very committed.” David continued with the courses and broadened them to include catechists, Caballeros of Cristo Rey, the Auxiliaries of the Virgin Mary and campesinos.⁸ “The greater dynamism was with the young” Delegates, however. Since he was pleased with what David was doing in Tecoluca, one day Father Boulang said to David: “Look, I have the possibility of four paid tickets with all expenses paid to go to Chile ... we have thought that you could go.” So, David, along with Father Boulang, a nun, and a young leader of ACUS (University Catholic Association), Francisco Díaz, went off to Chile. David points out however that he asked Bishop Aparicio permission to go to a meeting in Brazil organized by Bishop Helder Camera since his bishop would never have given him permission to attend the meeting in Chile. David indeed went to Brazil, from where he sent Aparicio a telegram, but the principal reason for his trip was to participate in the Christians for Socialism gathering. Once more, David broke with tradition and lied to his own bishop.

The Christians for Socialism meeting, attended by about 450 priests, nuns, and lay workers, was held for the purpose of bringing together those Christian leaders, also protestants, who were convinced that socialism, not capitalism, was the best way to achieve economic development and liberation in Latin America; but also to demonstrate support for Salvador Allende’s socialist government, elected in 1970. At this unique encounter a quote from Che Guevara was prominently displayed: “When Christians dare to give full-fledged revolutionary witness, then the Latin American revolution will be invincible ...” (Quoted in Berryman 1987, 28). David met a number of progressive Church leaders, such as Father Gustavo Gutierrez, Bishop Mendez Arceo from Cuernavaca, Mexico, and Father Arroyo from Argentina. He came across Father Pablo Richard once more, eventually becoming “good friends” with the theologian. The election of Allende in Chile was a beacon of hope for progressive, socialist Christians who hoped that elections could lead to fundamental change in the region. Most of the delegates to the meeting met with Allende during the conference at the presidential palace, La Moneda. It was so crowded in the meeting room that many of the attendees, including David, had to sit on the floor. During the meeting, excursions were organized so that attendees could “know the experience of Christian communities ... and of pastoral work” and cooperatives in the region.

⁷ David did not reveal the name of the individual and noted that, while a minister, the individual was eventually removed under a corruption scandal.

⁸ The Caballeros of Cristo Rey was a Catholic lay, men’s organization, like the Knights of Columbus. The Caballeros focused on the celebrations of patron saints, eliminating vice, and fighting against communism. The Auxiliadoras was a Catholic lay, women’s organization that focused on helping the poor, the sick, and prisoners.

Although the meeting was criticized from many quarters, David points out that at the meeting the “pros and cons” of socialism were presented, so that it was not an exercise in blind allegiance to a particular economic system. Nevertheless, it is clear that those who attended the meeting were critical of capitalism and the ills that economic exploitation had wrought in Latin America. Dependency theory was to a large extent the dominant paradigm through which to understand the region’s economic situation. While in Chile, David for the first time, participated in a large demonstration in support of the Allende government organized by MAPU, the *Movimiento de Accion Popular Unitaria*. David points out that before this meeting he had not really studied socialism or Marxism. But at the meeting, he saw that the ideals of socialism were “consistent with” Vatican II and Medellin and the resultant new, joint pastoral that the First Pastoral Week had embraced.

Owing to his increasingly progressive ideas and actions, Bishop Aparicio, who was very close to the wealthy landowners, attempted to transfer David to the town of Olocuilta, about 30 kilometers west of Tecoluca, where the bishop hoped he would be marginalized. Although David had already had numerous run-ins with landowners and had attended the progressive gatherings mentioned above, the tipping point for the bishop came when David refused to welcome at his parish in Tecoluca the new president of El Salvador, Coronel Armando Molina, who had become president via the electoral fraud of 1972 and had family in Tecoluca. In an effort to gain some legitimacy, Molina had been visiting communities all over the country in what he termed a “mobile government.” Many priests were committed to shunning Molina and thus signed a letter denouncing the president. David both signed the letter and essentially refused to give Molina the courtesy that would be due a head of state. The mayor of Tecoluca, Atilio Cañas, had written to David telling him to participate in the local welcoming of the president by saying a few words and seeing that the church bells were tolled in honor of the president. Additionally, Mayor Cañas let David know that since the president had family in the region, he would be giving a sizeable donation to the parish.

David discussed the mayor’s letter on the following Sunday with the discussion group that remained after the service in Tecoluca. Those who stayed behind were in unanimous agreement that the church should not receive the new president. Based on the discussions, David wrote a response to the mayor. In this letter, dated December 15, 1972, David said that he would not participate in the ceremony for Molina. He also wrote that since arriving in Tecoluca he had tried to work with the government but that the government had acted “hypocritically and had criticized his actions to help the poor, claiming him to be an agitator and a communist.” Toward the end of the letter, David wrote “I will not be present at such an act” (Rodriguez Letter, December 15, 1972). It is clear from this letter that David was developing a confrontation stance toward state authorities using words such as hypocrisy, insincerity, and injustice. In a little over two years, a traditional priest had broken with landowners, broken with his bishop and broken with the state. Although his reasons were sound, David had become a radical, contentious priest almost overnight.

Very soon after this bold move, on 6 January, 1973, Bishop Aparicio wrote a letter to David letting him know that he had seen his letter to the mayor and that, owing to his “posture toward the authorities which will bring negative effects,” he was transferring him to Olocuilta in the first days of February (Aparicio, Letter, 6 Jan. 1973). David, however, was already extremely popular in his parish. When parishioners found out that bishop Aparicio was planning to remove him, they decided to attempt to stop the change. One of the key leaders of the move to keep David at Tecoluca was Toño Navarro, a lay leader who told David soon after hearing of Aparicio’s decision, “No, you are not going, you are not going.” Another leader who worked to keep David at the parish was Victor Hernandez, the president of a cooperative that David had helped to establish in 1971. Navarro and Hernandez, along with other parishioners who had been “formed” by David, organized a long march from Tecoluca to the Cathedral in San Vicente, carrying the image of San Lorenzo. On several occasions Aparicio refused to speak with David’s supporters. The demonstrators eventually entered the Cathedral on the third day of demonstrations when the door was open and used the church’s sound system to denounce Bishop Aparicio. This effort to keep David in Tecoluca received national press coverage; and, thus, got the attention of the government, the landed elite, and also the nascent guerrilla organizations. The Bishop was convinced that David was behind the parishioner’s defiance, but David points out that he had asked the leaders, Navarro and Hernandez, to accept the bishop’s decision. The changes that had taken place in the church, however, had already inspired lay Catholic leaders to challenge authority and so they did.

Eventually, Bishop Aparicio grudgingly agreed to divide the parish of Tecoluca in two, placing Father Rafael Barahona as parish priest of Tecoluca and assigning David to the southeast coastal area of the parish at the town of San Carlos. This compromise came only after a delegation of priests from San Vicente appointed by Aparicio negotiated with David, the Caballeros and base communities in Tecoluca, and with Father Barahona, who was hesitant to replace David. It was certainly a step down, a strong rebuke, but organized Christians and progressive priests had challenged the bishop and prevented the transfer; and David was still essentially in his home turf where he would continue to organize peasants.

The town of San Carlos had a nice ermita but did not have a parish house. David’s job became much more difficult in that living conditions were poor, the small communities near the coast were infested with malarial mosquitoes, and vices – drinking, gambling, and prostitution – were much more prevalent than in the communities around the town of Tecoluca. The population in the area would swell during the cotton harvest owing to the presence of seasonal workers from the northern parts of the country. David compares it to “the wild west” in the United States (as he had seen in movies). Nevertheless, David was helped by an old man, Cirilo, who kept the church clean, tolled the bells and helped David acquire what he needed to live in the new sub-parish. Cirilo would say, “Don’t worry father, we will get along, from hunger we will not die.” An evangelical church existed in San Carlos and when the minister heard that a Catholic priest had arrived to live in the community, he challenged David to debate the bible. David did not answer his challenge but one day decided to visit the minister whom upon

seeing him said “the devil has entered my house!” Armed with the spirit of the new ecumenicalism inspired by Vatican II, David proposed to the minister that they work together, saying to him “the bible is not something we should use to argue but to bring us together.” David recalls that in the past priests would organize catechists who would harass protestant pastors. In fact, one of the missions of the Caballeros de Cristo Rey had been to drive out evangelicals from San Vicente.

Identifying and Forming Lay Leaders: Leaders and Followers

Despite the difficulties David began to construct a parish. He started soccer teams, a chorus, and organized *pastorelas*, or bible stories expressed theatrically. And, as he had done in Tecoluca, he began to identify “natural leaders” to develop into catechists and Delegates of the Word, who would in turn help form base communities and bible circles. As he had done in Tecoluca, he started by asking people to stay after church to discuss the bible and from there he identified lay leaders who would organize the campesinos into base communities. David recalls that campesinos were not used to expressing their opinions so the task of getting them to assert themselves was initially difficult. Peasants tended to express their concerns only with each other and never to authorities, such as government officials, priests, and security forces. Slowly but surely, however, he gained their confidence and once they realized that he would not betray them, they began to discuss their concerns and how the bible, the gospels, related to their “reality” as repressed and exploited campesinos. David recalls that some of the participants would find verses in the bible that he himself had never connected to the life of the Salvadoran campesino. David, highly impressed, would say “I am learning more about the bible here than I learned in the seminary.” Eventually, Bishop Aparicio heard about what David was telling the campesinos and admonished David, saying “how can you say that!” When David had been parish priest of Tecoluca his visits to the communities near the coast were few and brief, hardly ever staying over night. But, now that David was stationed in San Carlos, he was able to better organize the people there and thus his popularity in the entire parish of Tecoluca continued to grow. David recalls, “I had a great deal of credibility.” Rather than minimizing his influence, splitting the parish in two allowed David, and Father Barahona who also promoted the new pastoral, to more fully mobilize the people of the parish of Tecoluca, which included parts of the departments of San Vicente and La Paz.

Now that David was permanently in San Carlos, his relationship with the priests in the parish of Santa Maria right across the river Lempa increased. These priests were steeped in the ideas of liberation theology and David began to consider and learn about these ideas more methodically. Padre Juan Macho, who had invited David to join La Nacional, had started a Center for Campesino Formation, at Los Naranjos, close to the town of Jiquilisco. The Centro Naranjos was set up in a school that had been abandoned, but owned by an order of nuns, who donated the buildings to Padre Macho. The purpose of these centers was to provide practical education and training to campesinos, such as first aid, farming techniques and animal care, as well as bible study with a focus on social

justice and the national “reality.”⁹ Once it was ready to operate, Macho invited David to offer classes at the center. David taught Salvadoran history using popular, and often revolutionary, songs to inspire discussion. For example, he would sing the song “I am Latinamerican” (*Soy Latinoamericano*) and after the song would ask the campesinos, “What do you think of this song?” The song included the following lines: “If we have to fight, let’s fight, if that is the way to triumph.” These popular songs would often lead to a discussion of the land tenure problem in El Salvador and the need to fight for the right to land. David also used a common method of training with cassette tapes, called “*El Jurado Numero 13*,” or juror number 13. The cassettes would contain debates on a particular community problem. Different people in the program, the land-owner, the worker, the mayor, the priest, would state their opinions concerning the problem. David recalls that “It was almost like a soap opera,” so most of the participants liked the program. After listening to the entire program, the participants in the course would then discuss the issue, the various opinions, and finally decide, as a juror would, whose position was the correct one. The programs, which “came from South America,” were developed to raise people’s “social conscience.”¹⁰ David recalls that most of the students had little in-depth knowledge of Salvadoran history. When he spoke of things such as the rebellion of Anastasio Aquino or the taking of property from the indigenous people by the oligarchy, the response would often be “I did not know that.”

These courses were offered principally to lay leaders, delegates of the word and catechists, who had been identified by priests in the area as “natural leaders.” The individuals selected not only showed themselves to have leadership potential, but also a commitment to the church and its new pastoral mission. The campesinos who attended these courses gained a “great deal of local prestige,” to a large extent because of the practical skills that they had gained which they could then use to help the campesinos in their local area in very direct, useful ways. For example, they would help people in the countryside with such things as first aid, organic farming, preserving the fertility of the land and literacy. The Catholic Church’s radio station, YSAXX started broadcasting literacy course that the lay leaders would use to help people in their communities read. Of course these literacy courses also served as a “consciousness-raising” vehicle. The Naranjos Center eventually offered courses at four levels, meaning that the fourth level of courses was for the “most committed” (*comprometido*) catechists and delegates. At the fourth level, as David points out, discussions were much more politically oriented, with talk of political parties, than in the first courses which focused principally on practical training and the bible. As the students progressed, the courses were both more political and more focused on organizational skills.

⁹ The word *realidad*, reality, became almost synonymous with the new pastoral. Essentially, learning about reality meant learning about the causes of injustice and exploitation. The poor would be taught that the worst sin was social sin, not personal sin. Social sin referred to the oppressive and exploitative social structure that was imposed by the state, the security forces and the capitalist system that served the interests of the elites and of the United States. These ideas although obviously consistent with Marxist thought were espoused by Papal encyclicals, the Vatican II document *Gadium et Spes*, and by the Medellin documents Peace and Justice.

¹⁰ David did not remember exactly from where the programs originated but since they were distributed through the Archdiocese they were most likely programs developed by some progressive Church institution such as CELAM or IPSLA.

Eventually a “network of campesino training centers” was established in El Salvador. After the first center in the parish of Santa Ana, in Chinalinga, called “Centro Castaño” was established, several centers sprouted up in the country, including Los Naranjos, the Center San Lucas in San Miguel, Divine Providence Center in Santa Ana, a center in Chalatenango (Chacalcollo), and a center in Bermuda, near Suchitoto. Eventually a joint coordination was developed between these centers and called Campesino University, that established several “levels of formation” at all of the centers. The first two levels were carried out at Los Naranjos, Divine Providence and Chacalcollo. The third and fourth levels would take place at El Castaño. David points out that his involvement with these centers and the Campesino University was a “good experience” for him because his commitment grew and he was able to visit many parishes and communities and meet many Delegates and catechists in many parts of the country, giving him a much greater national perspective. David recalls that to this date he will come across someone who will say, “Because of you I became committed.” David says “these were intense times of much reflection, commitment, and much sincerity.” As always, David would use the guitar as a vehicle for entertainment and for reflection, via popular, often revolutionary, songs, which of course made him a particularly popular lecturer and animator (*animador*). David points out that the network of centers, under the banner of Campesino University, along with the joint pastoral promoted by the Pastoral Week, generated “much solidarity” among communities and “broke the borders between our parishes.” The network of centers produced leaders who “were at the service of their communities.” Montgomery points out that in the 1970s over 15,000 lay leaders were trained at these centers (Montgomery 1983, 71).

The training turned natural leaders into people with “greater commitment” to change. Although most campesinos may have already been well aware of the “injustice frame” in which they lived, this new perspective gave them a clearer reason for their plight, a clear enemy to combat (the state and capitalism), and a realization that they had a strong ally – the Catholic Church – if they decided to fight for their rights. In essence, the new interpretation of El Salvador’s putrid economic and political systems employed dependency theory, class analysis, as well as the Gospel, a combination that was much more palatable to the campesino than a purely theoretical, atheistic Marxist analysis.

All in all, according to David, the liberationists in El Salvador, priests and nuns alike, “... contributed greatly in waking up the people.” He adds “the methodology of popular participation was implemented by the church.” The catechists who were formed by the centers and parishes “developed a great deal of credibility with the people.” At first they were principally Christian lay leaders but over time they became key community leaders, owing to the leadership and practical skills they had gained in the courses they had taken. David recalls that these leaders had “a good perception of what was happening in the country even if they couldn’t read and write.” “We would say,” David recalls, “they have studied in the university-of-life.” In essence the church, via progressive priests and nuns, created an army of political activists in a country steeped in poverty, exploitation and political exclusion. Willingly or not, the Church created the subjective conditions for a volcanic social eruption. But the historical record provided by

Padre David and those who knew him shows that this process involved the sequential conversion of the Latin American church, then local priests and nuns, then local lay leaders, and finally the peasants, who may have been politically “awakened” but only once they saw that a powerful ally – the Catholic Church – was on their side.

At first David was committed to working within the system to achieve structural changes in El Salvador. However, a few key events convinced him that change would come only by employing force. The electoral frauds of 1972 and 1974 convinced David that elections had been and would continue to be a farce in El Salvador. Then in August, 1974, six peasants from a caserio in his parish called La Cayetana were killed by the National Guard after they had tried to keep farming the land they had farmed for decades. The land owner convinced the government to send in the guardsmen and in an ensuing struggle six community leaders, mostly catechists and delegates of the work were gunned down. Thirteen other men were “disappeared” but eventually found naked in a nearby community. These events convinced David that campesinos not only had the right to use force but that he himself would “accompany” them in their struggle against the oppressive and exploitative state. At the end of 1974, David made the difficult decision to incorporate himself into the FPL and began his clandestine life. His involvement in the FPL is to a large extent what drove him to urge La Nacional a few months later to take over the Cathedral.

On August 2, 1975, progressive priests, along with some nuns and lay workers, about 40 individuals as David recalls, took control of the Cathedral in San Salvador. “We shut the cathedral doors, put up loud speakers, and started making denunciations,” remembers David, adding “we also played revolutionary music.” The date was of particular importance since it coincided with the celebrations, from 1 to 6 August, of El Salvador’s patron saint, the “Divine Savior of the World.” Perhaps most noteworthy, politically, was that the occupation of the cathedral led to the founding of the Popular Revolutionary Block (BPR), comprised of a broad array of popular organizations linked with the FPL, namely ANDES (secondary school teachers), UR-19 (university students), AES (secondary school students), UPT (a regional peasant group), MCS (artists), CONIP (the popular church), and the FTC, which united the UTC (Union of Rural Workers) and FECCAS (Federation of Salvadoran Christian Peasants). The Block represented the largest conglomeration of popular, revolutionary organizations in the country, which would mobilize 300,000 people in the late 1970s. Most of those who had taken the cathedral over were already either “incorporated” into or sympathetic to the FPL and its goal of creating a large popular block to fight against the regime.

Conclusions: Top-Down Popular Mobilization

Many people see the Salvadoran civil war and revolutionary movement as having started in 1980, when the FMLN was formed and the U.S. government began to send extensive military and economic aid to El Salvador. However, in 1975, the stage was already set for a civil war in the country. While the small revolutionary cells were certainly a factor, the progressive Church had already developed the ideas and formed the leaders who would challenge the state in the 1980s. The government, army, and

economic elite were equally determined to keep things the way they were, particularly to prevent changes inspired by the Church. The following years brought continued clashes, including intense repression against the church that culminated in Archbishop Romero's assassination on March 24, 1980. Peasants affiliated with revolutionary organizations carried out a number of land seizures in Chalatenango, Cinquera, Tecoluca, and Zacatecaluca. David was often named as an instigator in these peasant uprisings. In fact, David had now been moved by the FPL from his responsibilities of organizing Christian communities to the broader role of organizing campesinos in general.

The circumstances that led to the civil war in El Salvador had much to do with the Catholic Church's doctrinal changes in the late 1960s. These doctrinal changes were precipitated by the crisis the church was experiencing in the region in that decade – the challenges from Marxist ideology and Protestantism. Once the church changed its doctrine by adopting the preferential option for the poor, some priests and nuns in El Salvador, aided by Archbishop Chavez y Gonzalez, fully endorsed a new pastoral that quickly (within 5 years) led to the development of thousands of lay leaders who in turn mobilized thousands upon thousands of campesinos. This rural political mobilization along with Church assistance provided the organizational strength that the FMLN used to almost bring down the Salvadoran state in the 1980s. This dramatic history however was made by a process whereby first priests and nuns were “converted” by a new Church doctrine and then those progressive church leaders helped to convert their followers.

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