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THE GOVERNMENT SHALL BE UPON THEIR SHOULDERS: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

by

J. Charlene Floyd

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

1997

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Abstract

THE GOVERNMENT SHALL BE UPON THEIR SHOULDERS:
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND DEMOCRATIZATION
IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

by

J. Charlene Floyd

Adviser: Professor I. L. Markovitz

This study is an examination of the relationship between religion and democratization in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas. During the period under consideration (1960-1994), the Catholic church in this diocese has experienced a number of significant changes. For example, the *catequistas*, or lay preachers have developed expanded roles as community/political leaders, creating an arena in which civil society has flourished. These changes have altered the church's role in the social and political arena.

A number of key historical benchmarks are examined in this study, including the violent eviction of 723 *campesinos* from the Finca Wololchán, the arrest of Padre Joel Padrón, the Xi'Nich march for indigenous rights, attempts to oust Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, the Zapatista uprising and the 1994 presidential election, in order to determine the church's role in the democratization process underway in contemporary southern Mexico.

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This study demonstrates that there are at least three qualities--visibility, staying power and theology--which combine to distinguish the church from other social and political actors. The Catholic church in Chiapas has constructed a theological rationale for political participation. The addition of the element of faith has reshaped the terms of the political debate. This can be seen most clearly in attempts to define democracy. Samuel Huntington, like most political scientists, adopts a procedural definition of democracy, focusing on contested, participatory elections. In Chiapas, many of the church leaders combine a procedural definition with a purpose definition of democracy sometimes blending politics with prophecy. They remain committed to the procedure of contested, participatory elections, but cast their pursuit of democracy in much broader terms. Democracy is described as a means to secure "a new heaven and a new earth." This study considers whether these efforts encourage or discourage democratization, concluding that the Catholic church in Chiapas has been influential in the democratization process but that the church's role is necessarily limited. The church can encourage, but it cannot complete the democratization process.

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Acknowledgments

It is with appreciation that I acknowledge the generous financial assistance of the Institute for the Study of World Politics, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Andrew Silk Dissertation Award (from the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York). These grants and awards, in addition to being welcome votes of confidence, made it possible for me to focus my attention fully on the completion of my dissertation.

My adviser I.L. Markovitz and my reader Bernard Brown pushed and pulled, making me look at and then walk toward places I never realized existed. I have learned many lessons from these two distinguished scholars. The advice and encouragement of Margaret Crahan proved an invaluable asset to this project. In addition to Professors Markovitz, Brown and Crahan, John Harbeson and Ronald Waterbury made thoughtful and provocative contributions as members of my supervisory committee. David Brooks suggested I study Mexico in the first place and shared his expertise with me. Jonathan Fox helped me sharpen the focus my project and Neil Harvey generously shared the wealth of information and insight he has gathered after many years of study in Chiapas.

It is impossible to capture within these pages the deep sense of gratitude I feel toward those in Mexico who enabled me to complete this project: Andres Aubry of INAREMAC, and perhaps more importantly INAREMAC's librarian Matilde who graciously opened figurative and literal doors for me so many mornings and afternoons; Leo, Pablo Romo and the staff of the Centro Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas who challenged all my "political scientist" assumptions; Loren and Cecilia in Yajalón and Pepe and Esther in Bachajón who helped me understand something about ministry; Hermanas Clement and Lucy who became beloved friends as well as teachers; Don Samuel who I first encountered joyfully sweeping the churchyard late one Sunday afternoon; and Fanny, Nicolas, Zulema, Ivan and Dorcas--this family was *my* family in Mexico, their home became my home, whether watching movies or the moon, disco dancing or discussing politics, eating tacos or tamales, they provided me with a safe place to which I could always return. There are numerous others--people who let me sleep on their floors, showed me the way to the *combi*, patiently pointed out dignitaries during demonstrations, translated speeches, invited me to meetings and masses, gave me an orange, a chiclet, a candle--people who had so little yet gave so willingly. Faced with such magnitude of generosity, words seem so necessary yet so lacking.

Ruth Chojnacki, Christine Kovic and Karen O'Brien are three women from the United States who I met in Chiapas. Each engaged in her own doctoral studies, the brilliance, stamina and ingenuity of these women continue to inspire me. Ruth and Christine spent a great deal of their time and energy helping me navigate diocesan complexities. Without their assistance (in Mexico and later in the US) this dissertation would not exist. Karen taught me the value of being a scientist. The friendship of these women is a gift for which I am truly grateful.

My "team" in the United States is equally deserving of my gratitude. Those responsible for my *montaña de cartas* while I was away and those who have stuck with

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me up to this moment. The friendship of Patti McSherry, whose scholarship and perseverance remind me that *it is possible*, has been a tremendous help to me at every stage of this project. Jane Williams and Dave Richards filled our shared workspace with the music of creation. Peter Arndtsen, Kathy Burkett and Claire Arndtsen walked with me. Chris Madden, Susan Marchand and Julia Madden sang to me. Ken Guest (my academic soulmate), Vicki Clark and Thomas Luke Guest played with me. Corrie Horshinski healed me. Jeanne Voltz found ways to feed me. Jane Searle outfitted me and Patrick Sciaratta talked with me. Amy Gregory and Bill Phillips laughed and danced with me. Ed Horne, Sara Goold, Olivia and William Horne had space for me. Frances Helen Guest dreamt with me. Scott Matheny called me. Pat Rothrock, Etta Shepherd and Lucila Velez knew I could do it. Friends and family from the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew have made all the difference in the world.

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Introduction

In the early hours of January 1, 1994, Mexico's president Carlos Salinas de Gortari received a message which not only abruptly halted his New Year's celebration but also interrupted his plans for Mexico's economic, social and political transformation. A group calling itself the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) had taken over four key towns in the southern-most state of Chiapas. The Zapatista uprising radically reshaped the political and economic reality of Mexico. Indigenous revolutionaries seemed out of place in the political and economic framework of a country striving toward parity with two first world trading partners, Canada and the United States.

In their urgency to locate the source of the uprising, the Mexican government and economic elite in Chiapas immediately accused the Catholic church of inciting the rebellion. Bishop Samuel Ruiz García and "his" *catequistas*, or lay preachers, were deemed responsible. The rapidity with which the church was declared culpable raises a number of questions regarding the relationship of religion and politics in Mexico. What are the linkages between the Catholic church and the political process in Mexico?[1] What are the historical roots of the relationship between religion and politics in that country? What is the nature of the work of the Catholic church in Chiapas which made this recent accusation possible? Is the accusation plausible? What is the relationship between the work of the Catholic church and the democratization process

[1]Throughout this study the term "church" is used to refer to the Catholic church. This is not because Protestants are not present in Mexico; they are. The first Protestant missionaries arrived in 1871. By the early 1980s Protestants, or Evangelicals as they are called in Mexico, comprised less than four percent of the country's total population, while in Chiapas they number almost forty percent. George Collier, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland: The Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1994), 56. See also Jean-Pierre Bastian, "Disidencia religiosa protestante y imperialismo en México," in *La participación de los cristianos en el proceso popular de liberación en México* ed. Miguel Concha et al. (México, D.F.: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, UNAM/Siglo XXI, 1986).

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currently under way in southern Mexico? And finally, how does the experience of the church in Chiapas,mesh with recent developments in the study of religion and politics?

This study examines the mechanisms which helped facilitate the conversion of doctrine into politics, with a particular emphasis on the work of the catequistas. It focuses on the emergence of these catequistas, or lay preachers, over the last thirty-four years, as catalysts of democracy in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Traditionally within the Catholic church catechists oversee religious training or education. In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, however, the catequistas have also developed prominent roles as community/political leaders, bridging the gap between political and religious power structures and the base, and creating an arena in which civil society has flourished. Numbering more than eight thousand, these catequistas (eighty to ninety percent indigenous and bilingual in Spanish and Mayan languages) provide a vital link between the diocese and the thousands of poor, mostly rural communities where they live and work. Have these catequistas played an important part in the struggle for democracy which has been under way for generations in Chiapas? Have they lent support to recent efforts to ensure fair, open and meaningful presidential and gubernatorial elections? Did the unique ways in which the laity was empowered in this diocese enable the Catholic church to influence the building of democratic life in Chiapas? These are the questions addressed by this study.

This study adopts a definition of democracy in which participation and contestation are central tenets.[2] Did the church encourage democratization by providing an arena in which experiences of contestation and participation were not only accepted, but expected? In a country such as Mexico, which has been ruled by the same political party for almost seventy years, participation and contestation initially

[2]See Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

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experienced in other than electoral arenas can pave the way for participatory, contested electoral activity (in other words a democratic political system) in the future. Have the presence of energetic opposition (on the Left and on the Right) and forums for expressing these opinions contributed to democratization?

Method of Inquiry

I began preparatory work for this study of the role of the Catholic church in the democratization process in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, in July, 1993. A short research trip to Chiapas in November 1993 confirmed that the project was viable and important: the Catholic church in this area was at the heart of the political resistance whose calls for democratization were becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Resources--a myriad of primary and secondary source materials--were accessible, but no one, Mexican or otherwise, had collected and/or studied this material. The Zapatista uprising in January 1994 corroborated my assessment of the significance of Chiapas' struggle for democratization. As anticipated, the Catholic church played a key role in this rebellion--initially being blamed for its very existence and then being called in to act as mediator.

My first three months of 1994 were spent doing bibliographic work and background reading in the United States. In April of that year, work in Chiapas was begun, funded by a grant from the Institute for the Study of World Politics. This work included the library/archive research and participant observation detailed below. In spite of a variety of challenges, the people of Chiapas--librarians, priests, weavers, secretaries, peasant leaders, nuns, catechists, farmers, lawyers, community organizers, researchers--were surprisingly accommodating and encouraging.

Primary and secondary source research focused on the political, economic, social and theological context of the work of the Catholic church in the Diocese of San

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Cristóbal de Las Casas, identifying key actors, processes and historical moments.[3] I made extensive use of several significant document collections in San Cristóbal de Las Casas: Instituto de Asesoría Antropologic para la Región Maya, A.C.; Centro de Estudios Universitarios; the Diocesan Information Center (CEDIC); and Centro Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. Fortunately, the activities of the diocese have been carefully documented over the last thirty-five years; perhaps some of the most useful and intriguing examples being diocesan assembly and Pueblo Creyente documents, and the reports of Father Pablo Iribarren described briefly below. Each assembly (since 1975 an annual or semi-annual gathering of all the priests and nuns in the diocese) has a preliminary document laying out the issues at hand and a final document describing the debate and conclusions of the gathering. These documents, ranging in length from thirty to ninety pages, provided a fairly accurate account of the hierarchy's perceptions of the issues facing the church and the way in which they intend to respond. Documents of the assemblies of Pueblo Creyente, the laity's counterpart to the diocesan assembly begun in 1991, provided similar information from the lay perspective. The reports of Pablo Iribarren, a Dominican priest who served in the diocese and was instrumental in organizing catequista training in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, provided almost one thousand pages of documentation describing numerous catequista training events and his pastoral visits throughout the diocese in vivid detail. These are just a few examples of the wealth of primary and secondary source material examined for this study.

Participant observation included attendance of the Foro Internacional "Rompiendo el cerco," an international conference in San Cristóbal examining the

[3]The period of study, 1960-1994, was chosen for a number of reasons. First, its early years roughly coincide with Vatican II (1962-65) and the emergence of liberation theology as a political force in Latin America. Second, Bishop Ruiz arrived in the diocese in 1960 and has served there ever since. The presence of the same, albeit evolving, leadership in the diocese is an important constant. Third, and certainly related to the previous two reasons, the catechists began to assume community leadership in the early 1960s.

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impact and future of neoliberalism in the wake of the Zapatista uprising; participation in the Taller de democracia y elecciones, a three-day workshop for pastoral agents and catequistas in San Cristóbal; assisting the non-partisan national electoral observer organization Alianza Cívica with the coordination of training, orientation and placement of the international visitors in Chiapas observing the August 21, 1994 elections; leading the international visitor team to the *municipio* of Chilón to observe the elections; participation in the October 1994 gathering of the Convención Nacional Democrática in San Cristóbal; and attendance of numerous demonstrations, political meetings, base community and catequista meetings, and religious services throughout the Diocese of San Cristóbal.

The Instituto de Asesoría Antropologic para la Región Maya, A.C., (Dr. Andrés Aubry, director) graciously provided institutional support for this study.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter One examines the theoretical literature which illuminates the subject at hand, considering questions such as: What is democracy; is it better defined in terms of its procedures or its products? Can these be separated? Why does the church become involved in political change? How does a sector of the church which subscribes to a change-oriented theology impact democratization?

The primary concern of Chapter Two is to provide a historical context in which to locate the relationship between religion and democratization in Mexico. This chapter briefly examines the role of religious leadership in Mexican independence, the staunch anti-clericalism prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the introduction of liberation theology in the latter half of this century, and finally the dramatic changes in church-state relations in 1992.

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Explaining the theological rationale which guides the activity of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, is the objective of Chapter Three. Careful study of the work and writings of the diocese's bishop, Samuel Ruiz García, provides insight into the five theological premises: poverty and suffering are not the will of God; experience with poverty and suffering may lead an individual or a society into conversion; change in society is possible from a Christian perspective because of the power of the resurrection; the church is a catalyst for the construction of the Kingdom of God on earth; and the church is called to accompany the poor in their religious and political struggle.

The way in which the catequistas became key political actors is the focus of Chapter Four. The growing number and evolving role of these catequistas make the case of Chiapas unique within the Latin American church. Exploring the conditions which contributed to their evolution will shed some light on why these people are considered the "backbone" of the diocese, and why their role has become controversial.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven chart the changes which have taken place in the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in the years between the arrival of Bishop Ruiz and the most recent presidential elections (1960-1994). During the early period (1960-1980), covered by Chapter Five, the church tried to come to terms with the political reality surrounding it: thousands of small communities of poor, disempowered, indigenous people. The middle period (1980-1990), covered in Chapter Six, saw the church adopt a more aggressive role in democratization. The final period (1990-1994), covered in Chapter Seven, forced the church to clarify that role in light of the significant upheavals caused by the Xi'Nich march for indigenous rights, attempts to oust Bishop Ruiz, the Zapatista uprising and the Mexican presidential election.

Chapter Eight considers the broader ramifications of this inquiry for the study of religion and politics.

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CHAPTER ONE

Riding the Crest: Democratization and the Catholic Church

The relationship between the Catholic church and democratization in Latin America is complex and controversial. In this chapter the particular experience of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas will be placed within a wider theoretical context. The similarities and differences between the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas and other parts of Latin America where the work of the church has received scholarly attention will be weighed. The emergence and transformation of the concept of liberation theology and the way in which the church's definition of democracy shapes its political work will be examined. Finally the question, can the Catholic church make a contribution to democratization? will be addressed.

The role of the Catholic church in Mexico's political development has been as varied as it has been long-standing. The Mexican Catholic church helped give birth to an independent Mexican state. During much of the nineteenth century the church enjoyed an intimate relationship with conservatives who sought to safeguard its position of economic and political privilege. The backlash produced by this position of privilege left the church bereft of any legal status by the early part of the twentieth century. The challenges of Vatican II and Medellín helped encourage the Mexican church to reconsider its role in the political arena. This resulted in division: some within the church worked on behalf of those members of Mexican society who had been denied privilege while others sought to reestablish the church's privileged

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position. In Chiapas, much of the leadership of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas was unambiguously aligned with the former throughout the period under consideration in this study (1960-1994).

Since 1960, the church in this diocese has undergone a number of significant changes. First, the political role of the catequistas in the diocese has been intentionally expanded. Under the guidance of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, these lay leaders have evolved from traditional religious educators into religious and community leaders. Second, the bishop and many priests and religious[1] have reassessed theological premises and pastoral practices which treated indigenous culture as an obstacle to be overcome. During the period under consideration much of the church leadership in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas has begun to embrace the indigenous people and their culture and traditions as a gift to be valued, protected and defended. Third, as calls for systemic change grew louder the bishop and many of the priests and religious sought to respond, their efforts leading them to support struggles for land redistribution, initiatives to secure indigenous rights and, most recently, attempts to promote broad-based participation in free and fair presidential and gubernatorial elections. These changes within the church have, in turn, altered the church's role in the social and political arena.

In order to make some sense out of the complex and contentious political history of the contemporary church in Chiapas, this study will examine a number of key historical benchmarks in light of two related assumptions about the church's

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[1]Members of a monastic order under religious vows.

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relationship to social and political change. First, many religious leaders, and particularly many of those of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, often talk about democracy in different terms than politicians and political scientists. Many in the church tend not to separate purpose from process, or politics from prophecy. Religious leaders almost always fail in their attempts to implement concrete political (and economic) programs. It does not follow from this admission, however, that the church cannot contribute to the political process--specifically democratization--but rather that any analysis of the church's role must take into account its particular strengths and limitations, recognizing the definitional issues at stake.

The second assumption guiding this study is that the church has a unique position in society. Its prominent physical position (church buildings are often centrally located) and social position (church leaders are easily identifiable) make it vulnerable to political scapegoating. The church's staying power also contributes to that institution's uniqueness. Many secular organizations and political parties have come and gone, yet the church, albeit changing continually, has remained. Finally, its theological component is perhaps the most significant quality of the church and contributes to its uniqueness. The faith commitment of its members and of the institution is the characteristic which distinguishes the church from all other actors in the political arena. Hence the assumption that these qualities combine to afford the church a unique position in society.

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From Political Stabilizer[2] to Catalyst for Change: Christian Base Communities and Catequistas

Prior to the 1970s, most social scientists who studied religion either focused on church-state relations almost exclusively from the vantage point of the respective hierarchical elites, or they studied the importance of secularization to achieve political, social and economic development, reducing religion to a regressive impediment to

---

[2]Political scientists studying Mexico have found the distinction between stability and democracy to be useful. As Dankwart Rustow perceptively points out, any study of democratization must be divided into two parts: the first addressing the question "what conditions make democracy possible?" and the second considering "what conditions make it thrive?" Dankwart Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy," *Comparative Politics* (April 1970): 337. Similarly, Guillermo O'Donnell distinguishes between the conditions necessary for the emergence of democracy, those necessary for the consolidation of democracy and those necessary for the expansion of democracy. Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 3-18. In the case of contemporary Mexico the first two--emergence and consolidation--need to be considered most carefully.

Until recently most political scientists agreed that Mexico's political system was characterized by "basic political stability and institutional continuity since the formation of its official single-dominant party in 1929." Kevin Middlebrook, "Political Liberalization in an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Mexico," in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 123.

Political unrest in the late 1960s and 1970s and the collapse of the petroleum-driven economic growth of the early 1980s clearly strained the regime, but it did not break down. Instead the regime engaged in an intermittent process of political liberalization. According to Middlebrook, this process involves "the expansion of alternative mobilization channels through legalizing additional opposition parties and creating new opportunities for political competition and representation in the electoral and legislative arenas." Middlebrook, 124. In other words, at various times throughout Mexican history, pressure for change threatened the stability of the Mexican government which responded, in turn, by making certain concessions or liberalizing changes. On this issue see also Alfred Stepan, "Paths toward Redemocratization: Theoretical and Comparative Considerations," in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 65 and 72-74.

In 1994 the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) candidate Ernesto Zedillo won Mexico's presidential election handily in spite of, or perhaps because of, the growing unrest in civil society prompted by the January 1994 Zapatista uprising, economic uncertainty and a number of disturbing political assassinations. Urban centers faced economic hardship and the rural poor watched as North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and constitutional reforms dismantled their hopes of economic opportunity. The PRI's candidate was uninspiring at best; the people of Mexico had alternatives, and thousands of national and foreign electoral observers watched the elections to guard against electoral fraud. Still the PRI won. Many questioned the integrity of the campaign and the elections themselves, asserting that Zedillo's access to government resources meant that the other candidates could not compete fairly, and that fraud still tainted many polling places on election day. Many concluded democracy had eluded Mexico once again. See Chapter Seven for more discussion of the 1994 presidential election.

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modernization. From the perspective of many social scientists and political activists the church (hierarchy and base)'s sense of the sacred and its respect for tradition posed obstacles to new ways of thinking and of organizing society. If the old truths and existing structures were "god-approved," how was change possible? Political modernization was often defined as the exclusion of religion from the political system, or secularization.[3]

The advent of more progressive theological currents in Latin America helped turn the attention of social scientists to the participation of the laity, particularly the grassroots laity, and the church's efforts to effect social change on behalf of the oppressed.[4] Thus social scientists were alerted to a reality many had essentially missed: religion's shaping of political outcomes--in arenas other than church-state relations--may at times encourage rather than impede political development.

In the late 1970s and 1980s some social scientists looked at the increasing number of Christian base communities (CEBs) as a way to challenge Latin America's authoritarian regimes and promote democratization.[5] An abundance of studies were produced heralding the contributions of the CEBs to Latin American democratization. For example, Christian Smith, in a typical article, observes a number of ways in which

[3]See Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Political Modernization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and Cristián Parker, *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996).

[4]See for example Marcelo Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987); Scott Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil 1916-1985* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); and Scott Mainwaring and Alexander Wilde, eds., *The Progressive Church in Latin America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

[5]CEBs, Christian base communities or base ecclesial communities, are varied in their structure and their beliefs. In general these grassroots, Catholic communities have between twelve and seventy-five members and gather regularly to read scripture and discuss its meaning for their lives.

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the presence of CEBs in Latin America strengthened democratic institutions and practices including their ability to "create 'open spaces' in civil society"; foster an attitude of "engaged criticism"; bolster members' organizational, communication, and leadership skills; and provide a base from which political parties can be influenced.[6] Each of these characteristics, according to Smith, helped advance democratization in Latin America.

More recently some observers, like Phillip Berryman, have been reconsidering the contribution of CEBs to democratization. Berryman pessimistically notes that fewer and fewer of the young religious in Latin America are adopting models of ministry grounded in progressive change-oriented theology and he questions whether or not CEBs have made any lasting contribution toward the eradication of oppression.[7]

While Berryman's observations[8] merit serious consideration, any application of his conclusion to the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas must be tempered by the reality that the majority of liberationist Catholics in Chiapas are found in rural indigenous communities guided by catequistas, not CEBs. Thus the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas is distinct from many of the places studied by Berryman and others in two important ways: (1) Its bishop, Samuel Ruiz García, arrived in 1960, just prior to the opening of the Second Vatican Council (1962). Ruiz is one of

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[6]Christian Smith, "The Spirit and Democracy: Base Communities, Protestantism, and Democratization in Latin America," in *Religion and Democracy in Latin America*, ed. William H. Swatos, Jr. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 4-7.

[7]Phillip Berryman, "Is Latin America Turning Pluralist? Recent Writings on Religion," *Latin American Research Review* 30 no. 3 (1995): 119.

[8]See also John Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

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only a few members of the Latin American episcopacy who actively participated in Vatican II, Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo still serving in the episcopacy. (2) Responding to the isolation imposed by its rugged terrain and lack of infrastructure coupled with the overwhelmingly indigenous composition of its inhabitants, Bishop Ruiz encouraged the catequistas in the diocese to fulfill many key religious functions within their local communities. Often this led the catequistas to become significant political actors, merging the religious and the political. These distinctions--consistent episcopal leadership and the empowerment of the laity to work as semi-independent leaders, drawing strength from but not controlled by the religious institution--have helped shape the work of the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The emergence of these indigenous lay leaders (examined in detail in Chapter Four) is a particularly unique and noteworthy phenomenon which may alter, at least slightly, the prognosis for the progressive church in this region.

The Option for the Poor and Political Change

In Chiapas, sectors within the church, like many of their Latin American counterparts, experienced significant changes during the period between 1960 and 1994; socio-economic and political issues played a central role as the church defined its work and its constituency. The Catholic church has been an important voice on behalf of oppressed people in Chiapas almost since its inception. For example, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566), the first bishop of Chiapas, was instrumental in securing the passage of laws to protect the indigenous people from the colonizers.

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Although these laws proved inadequate to stay the abuses, this and similar efforts provide an important legacy upon which members of certain sectors of the church, who seek an end to oppression and the creation of a more just political system in contemporary Latin America, can build.

In the nineteenth century, when Latin America was securing its independence and the anti-clerical liberals were coming to the fore, the Catholic church lurched into steep decline. By the beginning of the twentieth century the Catholic church in Latin America was forced to admit that the popularity and influence it had once taken for granted were no longer quite so secure. Unions, radical political organizations, spiritualist cults and Protestant missionaries all were competing for the attention of the people of Latin America. Thus in the 1930s, in an effort to revitalize their church, the bishops of Latin America focused on training lay people to help address the shortage of priests. In the 1960s Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) encouraged these Latin American efforts and appealed to religious orders around the world to designate ten percent of their members to serve the church in Latin America and to contribute to the region's socio-economic development. Lay leadership was encouraged, as was the use of economic and political data to identify the particular needs within communities and strengthen the church's prophetic message. The goal of ten percent was never achieved, but the presence of increasing numbers of foreign missionaries did help facilitate a renewal of the Catholic church in Latin America.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the church's initiatives were heralded as a great success. However, the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the military coup in Brazil in 1964 caused many Latin American intellectuals and theologians to question whether Latin America's problems could be solved within a capitalist system. They questioned the relevance of the church and began to look toward alternatives, including Marxism.

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It was in this context that the Latin American bishops attended the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), convened by Pope John XXIII.[9]

Vatican II represented a marked break from the church's strategy in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s which some had identified as the New Christendom strategy. According to Christian Smith:

> Whereas the New Christendom strategy tried to "christianize" and control society, Vatican II affirmed the more humble "pilgrim" status of the church, journeying alongside the rest of humankind. Furthermore, Vatican II recognized evidence of God's work in--and therefore the value of--"secular historical progress."[10]

As political scientist Daniel Levine put it, after Vatican II the actions of the church began with social, rather than religious, truths; prior to Vatican II the church had attempted to make the world conform to a predetermined body of Christian thought.[11]

The Council was convened because the Pope "wanted to open up the windows of the church to let fresh air in from the outside world."[12] Vatican II marked among other accomplishments the emergence of a positive, open attitude within the church towards the world. The definition of the church was expanded to include the "people of God." Community was emphasized in addition to the institutional church. Vatican

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[9]The work of Vatican II complimented some of the efforts already under way in the Latin American church, although the Latin American bishops did not play particularly significant roles in the work of the Council.

[10]Smith, 17.

[11]Daniel Levine, *Religion and Politics in Latin America: The Catholic Church in Venezuela and Colombia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 37. In "Empowerment and Power in Latin America," Daniel Levine and David Stoll argue that, "The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and its extended impact in Latin America via Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) brought renewed interest in missionizing activity, but now with important differences. The decisions to translate liturgies into local languages and to encourage reading the Bible opened up new and highly popular fields for church activity. At the same time, emphasis on lay participation and (for a while) on internal democratization in the church spurred the growth of a series of hitherto unknown forms of organization, including networks of small groups . . . priests' associations and groups of study centers, some affiliated with the Jesuits, some independent." Daniel Levine and David Stoll, "Empowerment and Power in Latin America," in *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, eds. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James Piscatori (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 69.

[12]Joseph Gremillion, presenter, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching Since Pope John* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 1.

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II focused on the ways the church community could contribute to a just society. Structures and systems which supported injustice were condemned.[13]

Three years later in 1968, the General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) met in Medellín, Colombia to determine how to apply the work of Vatican II to Latin America. The meeting was titled, "The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council." The documents of the Medellín gathering identified "internal and external colonialism" as the cause of Latin America's suffering. These exploitative structures constituted a "sinful situation," and a "situation of injustice that can be called institutionalized violence." The task of eradicating this violence and creating a "just order . . . is an eminently Christian task." The church, according to the Medellín documents, is called to engage in a project of radical change or "authentic liberation."[14] As a result of this meeting the support of some church authorities was successfully garnered for a controversial program of social change. Sociologists Cornelia Butler Flora and Rosario Bello identify the Medellín gathering as a key turning point for the church:

> While the growing awareness of the church around the world of the dilemma of the poor gradually increased interaction of the Catholic church with the dispossessed in much of Latin America, a real shift in the church's class alignments has arisen only since the Medellín Conference of the Catholic Bishops in 1968.[15]

In the preparatory gatherings for Medellín, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez urged his colleagues to talk in terms of liberation rather than "development." Gutiérrez and other proponents of progressive, change-oriented theology (that which would soon be known as liberation theology). According to Cornelia Flora:

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[13]Bishop Ruiz participated in, and was profoundly affected by, Vatican II. His efforts to introduce the teachings of Vatican II and the gatherings of CELAM which followed are chronicled in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

[14]Gremillion, 446-462.

[15]Cornelia Butler Flora and Rosario Bello, "The Impact of the Catholic Church on National Level Change in Latin America," *Journal of Church and State* 31 (Autumn 1989): 527.

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> The thrust by the church, led by the theologians of liberation, toward a preferential option for the poor resulted in an explicitly antidevelopment stance, which viewed "third world industrialization and such programs as the Alliance for Progress and the World Bank at best as band aid [*sic*] solutions, and at worst, as instruments for continuing (albeit, more subtle) external exploitation and control." Thus, for the liberationists within the church, presumably a growing number after 1968, measures of development as traditionally viewed were antithetical to progress toward social justice.[16]

Thus some Latin American theologians had adopted a dependency model to describe the relationship of Latin America to the rest of the world.[17] In his ground-breaking work, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), Gutiérrez explains:

> The underdevelopment of the poor countries, as an overall social fact, appears in its true light: as the historical by-product of the development of other countries. The dynamics of the capitalist economy lead to the establishment of a center and a periphery, simultaneously generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions, and poverty for the many.[18]

As Arthur McGovern explains: "Social scientists had introduced the concept of liberation to emphasize Latin American dependency. Gutiérrez combined this socio-political sense of liberation with a biblico-theological meaning: God acted in history to save a people from every form of enslavement."[19]

The Medellín gathering set the stage for the consolidation of an emerging theological current, the theology of liberation. According to Smith, "What Medellín

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[16]Flora and Bello, 528.

[17]Although Ronald Chilcote maintains that "there is no unified body of thought called dependency theory," the explanation provided by Brazilian social scientist Theotonio Dos Santos is often cited by Latin American theologians:

> By dependence we mean a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected. The relation of inter-dependence between two or more economies, and between these and world trade, assumes the form of dependence when some countries (the dominant ones) can do this only as a reflection of that expansion, which can have either a positive or a negative effect on their immediate development.

Theotonio Dos Santos, "The Structure of Dependency," *American Economic Review* (May 1970): 231.

[18]Gustavo Guttiérez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 84.

[19]Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 9.

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introduced, liberation theology cultivated, elaborated, and systematized." Soon many other works followed Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation*. Smith states, "This new body of work provided a reasoned justification for the liberation theology movement."[20]

Although most academics argue that there is no single liberation theology and that the term liberation theologies would be more accurate, many theologians disagree. Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff maintains, "I must insist that there is one, and only one, theology of liberation. There is only one point of departure--a reality of social misery--and one goal--the liberation of the oppressed." Theologian Juan Luis Segundo agrees with Boff, "There is something basic shared by all of them [liberation theologians]. They all maintain that human beings are already building up the Kingdom of God here and now in history."[21]

During this period the church assessed and radically reshaped the way it understood itself and its mission. The church is a unique institution. Its sacred text and essential prophetic mission change very little. In fact, much of the work of the church is an attempt to preserve and perpetuate age-old truths. Yet, the church is continually faced with the need to reorient itself to a changing society. Sociologist Ivan Vallier notes that the church rarely responds to societal changes by eliminating outdated or traditional structures; instead it updates by adding.[22] Thus, the church is a constantly changing institution ridden with paradox which often communicates an inconsistent message. This is further complicated by the fact that as an institution the church has its own set of interests it struggles to preserve. Its efforts at self-preservation may put it at odds with its prophetic mission.

The mission or goal of the church is salvation. In *Religion and Politics in Latin America,* Levine explains: "Of course, the church is not primarily an agent of social,

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[20]Smith, 21.

[21]Quoted in Smith, 27.

[22]When Vallier uses the term *church* he is generally describing a monolithic Catholic hierarchy. Ivan Vallier, *Catholicism, Social Control and Modernization in Latin America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970).

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economic, or political action. As an intermediary between people and God, its central mission remains the diffusion of the message of salvation and service."[23] Still Levine acknowledges that salvation and service have political, social and economic ramifications. To attempt to separate religion from these ramifications is a false division, one which has little or no grounding in reality.

Vatican II's stimulation of an expansion of the definition of the church to give more emphasis to "the people of God" addressed this issue. This way of understanding the church has had tremendous impact in Latin America where some have interpreted it as an affirmation of the church as a community of believers.[24] Salvation is a collective rather than an individual event.[25] The task undertaken by the institutional church is to accompany the poor, that is, to support, enable and promote the efforts of the poor to create the Kingdom of God.[26]

In order to accompany the poor, Gutiérrez asserts that the church must reject its long-standing alliances with the elite. According to Gutiérrez, traditionally the dominant sectors of the church have been "closely linked to the established order. But for some time now we have been witnessing a great effort by the church to rise up out

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[23]Levine, *Religion and Politics in Latin America*, 13.

[24]According to Stewart-Gambino, Pope John Paul II "opposes the definition of the church as a 'people of God.' He argued then for a traditionally hierarchical definition of an institution 'in which laity worked under the direction of priests and bishops to achieve the "truth" of a life lived in faith,' and his policy has been consistent with this view since he became Pope." Stewart-Gambino, 4.

[25]There is an implicit adherence to leveling: a notion that everyone can be saved *if* they do justice. Juan Luis Segundo rejects this notion. He asserts that it is so difficult to be a part of the church that it simply is not possible for everyone to make the necessary commitment. Therefore he concludes that the church is by definition an elite institution.

[26]It is important to note that this was not the first time the Catholic church articulated a social doctrine. Pope Leo XIII did so in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. In keeping with this doctrine in 1941 the Pope addressed workers, saying: "You are duty bound to fight for a more just distribution of wealth. This has been, and continues to be, the central point of Catholic social doctrine. . . . The church is opposed to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a relative few while the great masses of the people are condemned to starve and live in economic conditions unfit for human beings." Quoted in Carlos E. Castañeda, "Social Developments and Movements in Latin America," in *Church and Society: Catholic Social and Political Thought and Movements 1789-1950*, ed. Joseph N. Moody (New York: Arts, Inc., 1953), 770.

See Chapters Three and Six for a more detailed discussion of the concept and practice of accompaniment.

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of this ghetto power and mentality and to shake off the ambiguous protection provided by the beneficiaries of the unjust order." Boff concurs. "The church," he explains, "is not doomed to carry out a purely preservative mission, contrary to the view held by orthodox Marxism."[27]

In other words the church, as understood by these Latin American theologians, needed to adopt a preferential option for the poor. As such the church could be both a sign and an instrument of the liberation of the poor. Its services of worship and rituals could be symbols or signs of liberation, but the church also needed to align these symbols with actions. Alvaro Barreiro explains:

> The church cannot, however, confine itself to a merely verbal proclamation [of its preferential option for the poor]. . . . In addition to the announcement and denunciation, which are always necessary, the church must perform deeds and acts of liberation like Jesus [did] . . . actions which were "signs" and "proof" of the presence of God's justice and mercy among human beings.[28]

In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas encounters of the priests and religious with indigenous campesino catequistas helped illuminate the "signs and proof of the presence of God's justice," and guide many in that church to focus on the church's role in addressing the issue of poverty.

According to Gutiérrez it is necessary to identify with the poor since it is possible to understand the suffering of Christ by understanding the suffering of the poor. But this relationship raises a number of questions. Gutiérrez asks:

> How are we to talk about a God who is revealed as love, in a situation characterized by poverty and oppression? How are we to proclaim the God of life to men and women who die prematurely and unjustly? How are we to acknowledge that God makes us a free gift of love and justice when we have before us the suffering of the innocent? What words are we to use in telling those who are not even regarded as persons that they are daughters and sons of God?[29]

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[27]Quoted in Smith, 43.
[28]Quoted in Smith, 45.
[29]Quoted in Smith, 32.

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One of the most controversial aspects of accepting that God has a preferential option for the poor is that *that* God must be a partisan God. Boff puts it this way: "God is especially close to those who are oppressed; God hears their cry and resolves to set them free. God is father of all, but most particularly father and defender of those who are oppressed and treated unjustly. Out of love for them, God takes sides, takes *their* side against the repressive measures of all pharaohs." Gutiérrez adds: "God loves the poor just because they are poor, and not necessarily, or even primarily, because they are better believers than others, or morally firmer than others. God loves them simply because they are poor, because they are hungry, because they are persecuted."[30] A God who takes sides is a political God.

The church in Latin America has not always necessarily been on the same side as this God who sides with the poor. As Gutiérrez points out:

> The Latin American Christian community lives on a poor continent, but the image it projects is not, as a whole, that of a *poor church*. . . . The majority of the church has covertly or openly been an accomplice of the external and internal dependency of our peoples. It has sided with the dominant groups, and in the name of "efficiency" has dedicated its best efforts to them. It has identified with these sectors and adopted their style of life. We often confuse the possession of basic necessities with a comfortable position in the world, freedom to preach the Gospel with protection by powerful groups, instruments of service with the means of power. It is nevertheless important to clarify what the witness of poverty involves.[31]

Thus Gutiérrez believes the church as an institution must respond to the poor by reorienting itself toward the poor and working to eliminate poverty. Inherent in this notion of witnessing poverty is, according to Gutiérrez, the idea of a repositioning of the church and the individuals within it. This is a three-step process: first one observes the poverty of others, then one listens to their experience of poverty and

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[30]Quoted in Smith, 33.

[31]Quoted in Ofelia Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 158.

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finally one finds ways to organize for their freedom. The third step raises the question, who is setting the agenda, or who is speaking for those in need of liberation? How does the church's accompaniment of the poor really work? Gutiérrez responds to these questions in this way:

> Finally, the process of liberation requires the *active participation of the oppressed;* this certainly is one of the most important themes running through the writings of the Latin American church. Based on the evidence of the usually frustrated aspirations of the popular classes to participate in decisions which affect all of society, the realization emerges that it is the poor who must be the protagonists of their own liberation. . . .[32]

In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the bishop and many priests and religious have been struggling for more than thirty years to put Gutiérrez's words into practice, to determine how best to accompany the poor. These efforts, ridden with tension and controversy, are examined in detail in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

Its commitment to the preferential option for the poor led naturally to political involvement for some sectors of the church. Argentine Protestant theologian José Míguel Bonino maintains: ". . . God's action is a constant call and challenge to man. Man's response is realized in the concrete arena of history with its economic, political and ideological options. Faith is not a different history."[33] Bonino continues: "Instead of asking, where is the Kingdom present or visible in today's history? We are moved to ask, how can I participate--not only individually but in a community of faith and in history--in the coming world? . . . History, in relation to the Kingdom, is not a riddle to be solved but a mission to be fulfilled."[34] In carrying out this mission some sectors of the church engaged in efforts to encourage systemic social change. According to Boff: "Liberation, by definition, involves a qualitatively new society. Reformist

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[32]Quoted in Schutte, 167.
[33]Smith, 40.
[34]Ibid., 42.

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measures are only tactical steps, not strategic goals."[35] As liberation theology developed, revolution, rather than democratization, was seen as the hope for the poor of Latin America.

On certain fronts the expanded definition of the church was received with enthusiasm. It initiated a period of optimism that social and political change was possible. But in Chiapas and elsewhere it was also met with severe opposition. Opponents began almost immediately to organize against the ecclesial changes. In 1972 Bishop Alfonso López Trujillo of Medellín was elected as the general-secretary of CELAM, marking an increased influence within the organization by the anti-liberationist sectors of the Latin American hierarchy. López Trujillo set about systematically dismantling many of the pro-liberationist programs which had been put into place by his predecessor, Dom Hélder Camara. Although its proponents no longer had access to many of the institutional benefits of the church, advocates of change drew strength from their grassroots adherents.

Both conservatives and liberationists believed the 1979 meeting of CELAM held in Puebla, Mexico would be critical. Both hoped to use the meeting to solidify their perspective for the future direction of the church. Pope John Paul II's attendance only heightened the importance of this meeting. During the Puebla gathering the Pope clearly made two points. He believed that the new society which was being pursued must be founded upon authentic Christian teachings and not secular ideology; he also asserted that the body steering the social mission of the church must be the official church hierarchy. Conservatives, who held organizational control of CELAM, worked diligently to ensure that all committees were under conservative control and that preliminary documents were drafted by conservatives (although the liberationists made use of informal channels to affect the documents). Though the conservatives' efforts and the Pope's statement did put a damper on liberationist activity, they were not

[35]Ibid., 46.

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sufficient to stem the influence of this current. The final documents contained an affirmation of the church's commitment to the preferential option for the poor.

By the late 1980s, the Left wing of the church had tempered its goals. The church's role encouraging peaceful transition to democracy in many states created what Samuel Huntington called the third wave of democracy--a "Catholic wave."[36] These democracies still left a great deal to be desired, but they gave progressive elements in the church reason to hope that democratization could yield a better life for the poor. By 1994, the leadership of the church in Chiapas, which included a significant lay presence, looked to democratizing initiatives to usher in this new society.[37]

Defining Democracy: Procedure and Purpose

> For the poor and believing people of Mexico, the transition of this society to democracy is a struggle which puts at stake not only the recognition of various ideologies, but survival, the possibility of eating, of not dying of some illness associated with poverty, the aspirations and the deepest desires of a believing people--that longs to see a new heaven and a new earth, where there is peace, health, education, life and work for all, where the old people live long lives and the children do not die of common illnesses--are at stake.
>
> --Pastoral Orientation of the Mexican Episcopacy: Democratic Elections, A Challenge for the Destiny of Mexico[38]

> [A] twentieth-century political system is democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to

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[36] Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

[37] See Chapter Seven for a more detailed discussion of the church's contribution to democratization in Mexico.

[38] Rafael Alvarez, "Los cristianos en la lucha por la democracia," *Cuadernos de educación popular* 8 (noviembre 1991): 20.

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> vote. . . . It also implies the existence of those civil and political freedoms to speak, publish, assemble, and organize that are necessary to political debate and the conduct of electoral campaigns.
>
> —Samuel Huntington[39]

According to Samuel Huntington, by the mid-twentieth century those discussing the definition of democracy could be divided into three distinct groups. These groups included those who considered democracy's definitive element to be:

1. The sources of authority for government [the will of the people];
2. The purposes served by government [the common good]; or
3. The procedures for constituting government.[40]

Huntington explains that the third, the procedural definition, is the only definition political scientists are able to operationalize. Thus he, and most of his colleagues, use a procedural definition, like the one quoted above, in their inquiries into the nature of democracy and democratization.[41]

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[39]Huntington, 7.

[40]Ibid., 6.

[41]See also the definition used by Joseph Schumpeter who, in his book, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy,* defined democracy as: "a system for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 269.

Larry Diamond, who distinguishes between electoral and liberal democracy, notes there is some degree of consensus regarding the definition of democracy but important differences still remain: "Fortunately, most conceptions of democracy today (in contrast with the 1960s and 1970s, for example) do converge in defining democracy as a system of political authority, separate from any social and economic features. Where conceptions still diverge fundamentally (but not always very explicitly) is in the range and extent of political attributes encompassed by democracy. . . . " Diamond continues, "contemporary minimalist conceptions of democracy--what I term here *electoral democracy,* as opposed to *liberal democracy*--commonly acknowledge the need for minimal levels of civil freedom in order for competition and participation to be meaningful." Diamond warns that at times electoral democracy focuses on elections to the exclusion of other key components of democracy. He maintains that "in addition to regular, free, and fair electoral competition and universal suffrage," liberal democracy has three requirements:

1. The absence of "reserved domains" of power for the military or other social and political forces that are not either directly or indirectly accountable to the electorate. . . .
2. The "horizontal" accountability of officeholders to one another. . . .
3. Extensive provisions for political and civic pluralism, as well as for individual and group freedoms.

Larry Diamond, "Is the Third Wave Over?" *Journal of Democracy* (July 1996): 21 and 22-23.

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Huntington's point regarding the need to operationalize one's definition of democracy is well taken, yet many church leaders, particularly those whose work was examined in the course of this study, are generally more concerned with inspiration than operation. Although deeply committed to the procedure of contested, participatory elections, many religious leaders in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas cast the pursuit of democracy in much broader terms. They often describe democracy as a means to securing "a new heaven and a new earth, where there is peace, health, education, life and work for all."

Partly a rhetorical device and partly a product of deeply-rooted religious commitment to social change, the tendency of these church leaders to use a purpose definition of democracy *in conjunction with* a procedural definition raises at least two interesting questions. (1) Are these religious leaders preaching the Gospel or manipulating their parishioners politically, or both? (2) Do their efforts encourage or discourage participation in the democratization process? That is, if the faithful are taught to equate the struggle for democracy with the pursuit of a new heaven and a new earth, will they become disheartened when their vote does not yield such a bountiful harvest? Or does the promise of a reordered society attract those who might not otherwise consider participating?

Combining a procedural definition with a purpose definition of democracy also forces the observer to consider the relationship between civil society and democratization. The democratization process includes building democratic life. Only when a democratic culture is in place can the democratization process be completed. In other words, the installation of democratic procedures may not be sufficient to warrant a political system being labeled democratic. If, as is the case in Mexico, a history of deceit and abuse exists, the need to develop trust or confidence in the political system must also be addressed.

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Civil Society and Democratization: Building Democratic Life and Institutional Trust

It is in the arena of civil society that the process of building democratic life and developing political trust is begun. Larry Diamond defines civil society as:

> . . . the *realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.* It is distinct from "society" in general in that it involves citizens *acting collectively in a public sphere* to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable. Civil society is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state.[42]

Diamond concludes that civil society is limited in its ability to effect change; still he maintains: ". . . even in such negotiated and controlled transitions, the stimulus for democratization, and particularly the pressure to complete the process, have typically come from the 'resurrection of civil society', the restructuring of public space, and the mobilization of all manner of independent groups and grassroots movements."[43] The church can participate in the process of building democratic life, and resurrecting civil society, by encouraging the formation of the mechanisms and the participation of citizens which are needed to sustain a vital democracy.

In *Democracy and Development in Latin America: Economics, Politics and Religion in the Post-War Period,* David Lehmann adopts the concept of *basismo*, a populist message which puts people at the base first. Though basistas cannot carry the complete burden of social and political change, their contribution is, according to Lehmann, critical to democratization. He also maintains that "democracy depends on

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[42]Larry Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* (July 1994): 5.

[43]Ibid., 4.

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the confidence of the people in institutions."[44] Lehmann asserts that this confidence has a multi-layered quality. He explains:

> Basismo proclaims its democratic identity, but it distrusts the formal apparatus of liberal democracy, just as it distrusts the formal apparatus of the modern state. It is more Rousseauiste than modern liberal democracy, emphasizing democracy as an educative and solidarity-building activity of face-to-face groups.[45]

Lehmann observes that the formal institutions of democracy are often regarded by some sectors of society with a sense of "alienation" and "distrust." In doing so, he identifies the utility of looking beyond the procedural definition of democracy. The existence of the procedures, he argues, is not sufficient to ensure democracy. Even if elections are "fair, honest and periodic," some may not be satisfied that a democratic political system has been secured. They continue to distrust the government because after a long history of corruption and deception their experience has yet to teach them otherwise.

Larry Diamond raises a similar concern in his article, "Is the Third Wave Over?" He notes that many countries which became democratic during the third wave of democratization (which began in 1974), adhere to a minimalist definition of democracy, that is a definition which acknowledges the need for only "minimal levels of civil freedom." Its reliance on this type of definition raises concerns about the third wave. Diamond asserts:

> Juxtaposing the two divergent trends of the 1990s--continued growth of electoral democracy, but stagnation of liberal democracy--demonstrates the increasing shallowness of democratization in the latter part of the third wave.[46]

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[44]David Lehmann, *Democracy and Development in Latin America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 74. It is important to note that Lehmann's use of the term "liberal democracy" *does not* correspond to Diamond's use of this term. Instead Lehmann's term "liberal democracy" is the theoretical equivalent of Diamond's term "electoral democracy."

[45]Ibid., 192.

[46]Larry Diamond, "The Third Wave," 28.

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According to Diamond in order to overcome the weakness inherent in much of the third wave a consolidation process which includes developing trust and confidence in political institutions is essential:

> If the historical pattern is to be defied and a third reverse wave avoided, the overriding imperative in the coming years is to consolidate those democracies that have come into being during the third wave. In essence, consolidation is the process of achieving broad and deep legitimization, such that all significant political actors, at both the elite and mass levels, believe that the democratic regime is better for their society than any other realistic alternative they can imagine. As Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, among others, have stressed, this legitimization must be more than a commitment to democracy in the abstract; it must also involve a shared normative and behavioral commitment to the specific rules and practices of the country's constitutional system. It is this unquestioning embrace of democratic procedures that produces a crucial element of consolidation: a reduction in the uncertainty of democracy, regarding not so much the outcomes as the rules and methods of political competition.[47]

In other words a procedural definition of democracy alone may not be sufficient for those who have scant reason to feel confident toward their government. Regular, contested and participatory elections, to borrow Robert Dahl's terms, are important components of democracy, but democratization limited to the mechanical administration of these processes may not adequately reflect the reality it has been devised to analyze.[48]

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[47]Diamond, "The Third Wave," 33. Diamond notes however, ". . . none of the 'nonliberal' electoral democracies that have emerged during the third wave has yet achieved consolidation." Diamond, "The Third Wave," 34.

[48] In her article "Popular Movements and the Limits of Political Mobilization at the Grassroots in Brazil," Carol Ann Drogus asks, "Why do women [CEB members] who have taken the difficult, dangerous step of confronting the state in authoritarian Brazil often fail to move into the easy activities of voting and campaigning for a party that is seen as the natural ally of their social movements?" Drogus examines the women's motivation, or lack thereof, for involvement. It is possible, however, that her definition of democracy, which is implicitly procedural, is problematic. Voting and campaigning for a party may not be central to the democratic aspirations of these women who share a sense of alienation or distrust which prevents them from considering the electoral process as a viable route toward political and social change. Carol Ann Drogus, "Popular Movements and the Limits of Political Mobilization at the Grassroots in Brazil," in *Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment*, eds. Edward L. Cleary and Hannah Stewart-Gambino (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 68.

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Human Rights and the Reconsideration of Democracy

Both Samuel Huntington and David Lehmann identify human rights violations in Latin America as a key factor prompting some on the Left and members of the progressive church to reconsider the democratic route to social change.

Huntington identifies individual liberty as the most important benefit derived from democracy: "Political democracy is closely associated with freedom of the individual. . . . Indeed, some measure of the latter [individual liberty] is an essential component of the former [democracy]."[49] Violations of individual liberty often resulted in the expansion of pro-democracy initiatives. Right-wing dictatorships in South America tended, according to Huntington, to stimulate the growth of Left-wing movements in pursuit of democracy. "In the 1980s, as Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan noted, the Latin American Left came to view 'procedural democracy' as 'a valuable norm in itself and as a political arrangement that offers both protection against state terrorism and some hope of electoral progress toward social and economic democracy.'" Huntington continues, "In a comparable vein, one of the fathers of liberation theology, Father Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, observed in 1988 that 'experience with dictatorship has made liberation theologians appreciative of political rights.'"[50]

Here, Huntington is highlighting the way in which some within the progressive church and the Latin American Left were moved in response to state terrorism and dictatorship to loosen their ties with Marxist alternatives and strengthen their

[49]Huntington continues, "Second, political stability and form of government are, as was pointed out, two different variables. Yet they are also interrelated. Democracies are often unruly, but they are not often politically violent. Third, the spread of democracy has implications for international relations." Huntington claims that, "an overwhelmingly democratic world is likely to be a world relatively free of international violence." Huntington, 28-29.

[50]Ibid., 58.

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connections to efforts toward democratization. The Latin American Left, he observes, combining a procedural with a purpose definition of democracy, began to consider procedural democracy valuable, because it was a good way to protect human rights and to achieve social and economic democracy. Procedural democracy was a valuable and necessary means to an end. The acceptance of procedural democracy implied no commitment to procedural democracy as an end in and of itself.

Lehmann agrees that the struggle for human rights was a key factor in the transformation of the Left and of the progressive church in Latin America. He maintains that the church's participation in the defense of human rights solidified its commitment to democratization in addition to the preferential option for the poor.[51] After numerous priests and religious personally experienced human rights abuses, the church became a protagonist in the struggle for systemic political change. According to Lehmann:

> One consequence has been to place the theme of citizenship--that is, of the human and civil rights of persons--at the forefront of popular movements, avoiding the assumption of earlier radicalisms that there could be no citizenship without a total transformation of society. The result may, finally, be effective pressure from below for that modernization of the state and of institutions of political representation which is so conspicuously lacking in the region. The irony is that an almost millenarian zeal fired with religious invocations was needed to "get the people to organize" in the manner of a modern civitas.[52]

Lehmann asserts that those within the church who adopted a change-oriented theology "got the people to organize" by effectively applying "pressure from below" to increase political representation. Thus Lehmann claims (and this study of the church's role in the democratization process in Chiapas corroborates his claim) that certain sectors of the church have supported efforts to secure procedural democracy while maintaining their commitment to democracy defined in terms of purpose. As is

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[51]Lehmann, 110.
[52]Ibid., 147.

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discussed throughout this study, but particularly in Chapter Seven, this definitional ambiguity has been the church's greatest weakness and its greatest strength. The church's participation in the democratization process has added some creative tension precisely because some leaders of the church have not allowed others to define the terms of the debate for them. Hence there exists a strain when social scientists try to interpret the political contributions of the faithful. Procedures are an essential component of democracy, but some religious leaders have insisted that qualitative issues--institutional trust, building democratic life, even a new heaven and a new earth--in spite of their amorphous, unmeasurable nature, cannot be eliminated from the discussion.

Can the Catholic Church Make a Contribution to Democratization?

Philip Russell dismisses the work of the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas as lacking influence after the late 1970s:

> One of the early influences [of the EZLN] was pastoral activity organized by the Catholic diocese of San Cristóbal in the 1960s and 1970s. Lay teachers known as catechists fanned out to some 200 localities. They were influenced by liberation theology, which at the time was an important current in Latin American Catholicism. The catechists organized base communities and encouraged people in Chiapas to openly articulate economic and social demands with the aim of improving their lot in society. . . . By the late 1970s, peasants were organizing their own groups without outside input. The Catholic church lost influence, in part due to the movement's becoming more radical.[53]

Russell argues that after the late 1970s the Catholic church no longer played an influential role in the democratization efforts under way in Chiapas. The work of the

[53]Philip L. Russell, *The Chiapas Rebellion* (Austin: The Mexico Resource Center, 1995), 32 and 34.

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church has changed dramatically in the period under consideration, and tangible results may be somewhat elusive, but it is incorrect to mistake these changes for loss of influence.

Most scholars have shed the naive optimism which characterized much of the work on religion and politics in Latin America in the late 1970s and 1980s. Some have reluctantly challenged prior claims that the progressive church might radically alter the social, political and economic structures in Latin America, while others, acknowledging mistaken predictions, continue to look for signs of hope.

In 1970, working in the Weberian tradition, sociologist Ivan Vallier sought to discern the "degrees to which religions possess general transformative capacities."[54] He argued that the church and politics could and should operate in autonomous spheres. But at the same time the church could play a positive role in the political development process. The church, he maintained, should be separate from the political sphere but not removed from political development.

Vallier observed that in Latin America, underdevelopment and political instability could be traced to economic frustration, blocked mobility channels and the power of traditional landowners, but he pointed to another area of consideration: the absence of a durable religio-moral foundation.[55] Vallier looked to the church to play a stabilizing role for political development:

> Political development in complex, changing societies requires the presence of an underlying core of religio-moral norms, which need to be relatively differentiated from the routine give and take of politics. . . . Political instability in Latin America is bred, in part, by the absence of a

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[54]Vallier, 5.
[55]Ibid., 42.

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> durable religio-moral foundation within which political processes can be stabilized.[56]

Vallier's work is useful as far as it goes, but there are at least three significant shortcomings. First, one must accept his rather questionable assumption of the absence of a "durable-religio-moral foundation" in Latin America. Second, Vallier describes a one-dimensional church--a monolithic hierarchy. He focuses solely on church-state relations and seems to believe that this monolithic Catholic hierarchy can provide or somehow create a "durable religio-moral foundation." Third, his work accounts for only one political role for the church: secular society sets the agenda--political development or democratization--and the church helps stabilize or legitimize it.

The church often plays a stabilizing or legitimizing role, but this is not the only role available to it. A multi-dimensional church--a church which includes a multi-faceted base and a multi-faceted hierarchy--might also be a facilitator of political activity.[57] Daniel Levine, writing in the 1980s, describes the role of religion in society in proactive terms; even contemplation and prayer, which many (especially social scientists) consider at best irrelevant to democratization, are discussed in terms of their transformative power.[58]

In the Latin American context, the transformative power of liberation theology was welcomed by its advocates and troubling to its critics. Working in the space created by Vatican II and the Medellín gathering and drawing on a rich tradition of Catholic social doctrine, early proponents of liberation theology were, according to David Lehmann:

> . . . placing the word [liberation] on their banner in order to carry out a revolution not only in Catholic theology, not only in the structures of the Catholic church, but in the very idea of what it means to be a good

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[56] Ibid., 43.

[57] See Dermot Keogh, ed., "Catholicism in Latin America: Conclusions and Perspectives," in *Church and Politics in Latin America,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 398-403.

[58] Daniel Levine, "Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspectives," *Comparative Politics* (October 1986): 95-122.

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> Christian and of the meaning of a worthwhile human life even for non-Christians and atheists. . . . These texts [sacred texts of Judeo-Christian tradition], this life [of Jesus Christ], and that tradition had been successively distorted and instrumentalized for oppressive purposes by feudalism, capitalism and now dependency and underdevelopment; the task was to recuperate them and turn them into the spiritual, ideological and practical basis for liberation. The new religious thought was radical in the strict sense that it proclaimed a return to the roots--to the roots, in this case, of Christianity.[59]

For Lehmann, an advocate, liberation theology represents an alternative to dependency and underdevelopment, a means to liberate the oppressed. Samuel Huntington, on the other hand, is troubled by liberation theology. He acknowledges the importance of the Catholic church's contribution to what he identifies as the third wave of democratization[60] but distinguishes between the strand of the Catholic church which promoted democracy and the strand that adopted liberation theology.

In other words Huntington argues that the "strand of opposition thought and activity" within the church emerging from Vatican II, as opposed to that which was aligned with liberation theology, promoted democratization. Describing the former, he states: "The changes within the church brought a powerful social institution into

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[59]Lehmann, 118.

[60]Huntington discusses three waves: first long wave of democratization (1828-1926); first reverse wave (1922-42); second short wave of democratization (1943-62); second reverse wave (1958-75); third wave of democratization (1974-). Huntington, 16.

Asking what accounts for the third wave of democratization, he cites five changes which "seem to have played significant roles:

1. Legitimacy problems of authoritarian regimes;
2. Unprecedented global economic growth;
3. The striking changes in the doctrine and activities of the Catholic church manifested in the Second Vatican Council in 1963-65 and the transformation of national churches from defenders of the status quo to opponents of authoritarianism and proponents of social, economic, and political reform;
4. Changes in the policies of external actors; and
5. Snowballing." Huntington, 45.

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opposition to dictatorial regimes, deprived those regimes of whatever legitimacy they might claim from religion, and provided protection, support, resources, and leadership to pro-democratic opposition movements."[61] This strand, he explains, "included the major segment of the episcopacy and emphasized human rights and democracy."[62]

On the other hand, Huntington continues: "The socialist or 'red' strand preached social justice, the evils of capitalism, the overwhelming need to help the poor, and frequently incorporated into its thinking substantial Marxist elements of 'liberation theology.' The latter influence did not lead the church in the direction of democracy, but in countries other than Nicaragua it did help mobilize Catholics in opposition to the existing dictatorship. . . . As a result of these developments, the overall position of churches usually shifted from accommodation to ambivalence."[63]

Huntington asserts that liberation theology "did not lead the church in the direction of democracy," rather this theology belongs to the strand within the church which actually impedes democratization. Huntington's claim is based on his conclusion that inadequate economic development poses a serious obstacle to democratization. He explains:

> Few relationships between social, economic, and political phenomena are stronger than that between level of economic development and existence of democratic politics. . . . Poverty is a principal and probably the principal obstacle to democratic development. The future of

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[61]Ibid., 77.

[62]Ibid., 80.

[63]Ibid., 80. In addition to these strands of opposition thought and activity, a third strand continued to adhere to the status quo.

Huntington's conclusion that "the overall position of churches usually shifted from accommodation to ambivalence" is lacking. A shift from accommodation to ambivalence does not sound like one of the key explanatory variables of the third wave of democratization. Where is the power in that?

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> democracy depends on the future of economic development. Obstacles to economic development are obstacles to the expansion of democracy.[64]

Huntington looks to capitalism and the free market to eradicate poverty and create the conditions necessary to encourage the expansion of democracy.[65] Since he finds liberation theology to be diametrically opposed to the market economy and committed to a Marxist alternative, it follows for Huntington that liberation theology discourages rather than encourages democratization.

The problem with Huntington's argument is that it fails to recognize the changes within the progressive church. Liberation theology is not a static entity; many factors including the increasing occurrence of human rights abuses discussed above, have affected its development. In the case under consideration in this study, the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas initially did adopt a Marxist perspective. However throughout the thirty-four year period (1960-1994) examined in the following chapters, this church's religious and political ideology, which has been affected by but is not limited to liberation theology, has shifted dramatically. For example, in 1994, as is discussed at length in Chapter Seven, the church played a key role in the presidential elections.

Huntington's "multi-strand" model is also problematic. His effort to provide a more sophisticated analysis of religious institutions by dismissing the "monolithic church" is an important step forward, but his "multi-strand model" does not accurately reflect the experience of many Catholic churches in Latin America, in particular the

[64] Ibid., 311. Thanks to Bernard Brown for bringing this passage to my attention.
[65] Ibid., 311-315.

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Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. There one strand of the church subscribed to a theological current in keeping with liberation theology and *also* defended human rights and democracy, while another strand vehemently pursued a politically conservative, hierarchically-focused church.

Although Huntington's multi-strand model is flawed, his doubts about the contribution of liberation theology to the democratization process raise a critically important issue which is particularly relevant to this study. The church, regardless of its theology, cannot successfully complete broad-based economic development initiatives and thus cannot *complete* the democratization process. The role of the church in the democratization process is limited by the effectiveness of secular efforts to eradicate poverty, create a viable party system and fortify state institutions.[66]

In sum, Huntington's claim that liberation theology is anti-democratic because it hinders economic development is overstated *and* understated. A majority of progressive theologians have rejected Marxism and embraced democracy. And the

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[66]Though convinced that the various components of civil society, in which he includes the church, can play a part in democratization, Larry Diamond also underscores the need for strong parties and effective state institutions to sustain newly democratizing societies:

> . . . many new democracies in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa will probably break down in the medium to long run unless they can reduce their often appalling levels of poverty, inequality, and social injustice and, through market-oriented reforms, lay the basis for sustainable growth. For these and other policy challenges, not only strong parties but effective state institutions are vital.

Without these elements civil society will be effectively silenced and its ability to bolster the democratization process essentially eliminated. Referring to the situation in contemporary Mexico, Diamond observes:

> A low level of economic development or the absence of a fully functioning market economy increases the danger that corporatism will stifle civil society even under a formally democratic framework, because there are fewer autonomous resources and organized interests in society.

Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society," 16 and 13.

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church, regardless of theological commitments, is not an effective promoter of economic development.

Cornelia Butler Flora and Rosario Bello in their article, "The Impact of the Catholic Church on National Level Change in Latin America," and Daniel Levine and David Stoll in their article, "Bridging the Gap Between Empowerment and Power in Latin America," also conclude that the church's role in the democratization process is limited.

Flora and Bello argue that liberation theology transformed the church's mission. Prior to liberation theology, they maintain, the church's mission for "the redemption of the human race" was a spiritual "burden whose commitment was action directed toward power groups and movements that oriented themselves to ecclesiastical tasks, such as Christianity courses, the Christian family movement, and charismatic renewal." After liberation theology, the church's mission was reinterpreted as "an ethical duty to proclaim justice on the social, national, and international level, and to denounce instances of injustice."[67]

Given this changed mission, Flora and Bello ask how liberation theology has affected the quality of life in Latin America. Although the church promoted socio-economic change, in most cases the church was forced to admit that its own efforts in this arena were unsuccessful. The Catholic church did not have the economic, organizational or technical skills and resources these projects required.[68] Flora and Bello also discovered a high correlation between church viability and military arms

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[67]Flora and Bello, 532.
[68]Flora and Bello, 531.

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purchases, causing them to conclude that although religious leaders who opposed government repression had received significant publicity, "it may be that the mass of the religious in the countryside are much more cooperative with the militarization than the popular press would lead one to believe."[69] In the end Flora and Bello suggest that the Latin American church's transformation, given its questionable impact on the quality of life, may have been more rhetorical than real.[70]

Levine and Stoll raise similar concerns. They conclude that despite "years of activism, many of the ordinary women and men who have been mobilized through grassroots religious groups are arguably worse off than when they began."[71] Levine and Stoll believe that religious change within the Catholic church in Latin America has empowered ordinary people but:

> . . . there is a palpable gap between this "empowerment" and "power"--between the new energies and orientations spawned by religious change and the capacity of communities and organized groups to achieve tangible and durable benefits.[72]

They attribute the gap between empowerment and actual power to a lack of social capital available to ordinary Latin Americans:

> Like any historical process, building social capital takes time. Those engaged in the process (group leaders, members, and those promoting such experiences) face dangers, difficulties, and opposition of all kinds. After all, the construction of independent resources and of a culture that promotes their sustained use challenges established arrangements of power and privilege. Opposition, often in the form of violent repression, is not just likely, it is inevitable.[73]

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[69]Flora and Bello, 539.

[70]Flora and Bello, 540. Similarly Christian Smith observes "Relentless persistence notwithstanding, however, the ongoing apparent inability to transform macro-social structures significantly can have a discouraging effect." Smith, "Spirit of Democracy," 8.

[71]Levine and Stoll, 64.

[72]Levine and Stoll, 65.

[73]Levine and Stoll, 66.

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The formation of social capital is cut short when a group tries to move from its "religious origins to political ends" before a solid foundation has been constructed. Still if they are willing to work patiently and slowly, religious groups are particularly well-suited to building social capital:

> Religious change contributes to the formation of social capital to the extent that religious groups establish bases for social trust in forms of freely given cooperation with the potential to reach beyond explicitly religious activities to undergird cooperative activity in other walks of life. . . . The slow construction and reinforcement of relationships of trust among individuals and groups lays a basis for broader arrangements of civic engagement, giving substance to the very notion of a "civil society" founded on organized citizen initiative and independent of the state. . . .[74]

Yet this process is often interrupted by any number of obstacles including overbearing clergy and religious or the lack of long-term commitment. Levine and Stoll recognize that the solution is paradoxical:

> Bridging the gap between empowerment and power is more likely when power itself is not an initial goal. Groups need to consolidate their own identity and to found their inner life on enduring bonds of solidarity, trust, and the experience of common effort. . . .
>
> Building social capital is a project for the long haul: closing the gap between empowerment and power is less a matter of bringing the majority to power than of learning to live and survive as a minority, playing the political game day to day at all levels. For the new politics to have a chance, groups will have to play the old politics more attentively than ever before.[75]

In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas the issue of empowerment versus power has been critical. As will be discussed in detail in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, at least some measure of leadership is gradually being transferred from the hierarchy to the base. A vast network of catequistas has been trained for political

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[74]Levine and Stoll, 75.
[75]Levine and Stoll, 92 and 94.

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change. Communities have been organized. Peasant groups have been supported and resourced. Large-scale voter registration efforts have been undertaken and electoral observation efforts have been coordinated. The diocese has moved far in its efforts to empower the ordinary people of Chiapas for the work of democratization. Yet, from any objective standpoint, political power in Chiapas remains in the hands of a small elite associated with the PRI.

Can the Catholic church make a contribution to democratization? In the long run, the answer is probably yes. But the contribution is of an indirect nature. The church can provide a relatively safe haven within which the powerless in a society can begin to break what Levine calls "a culture of silence."[76] Or as Diamond puts it:

> Civil society can, and typically must, play a significant role in building and consolidating democracy. Its role is not decisive or even the most important, at least initially. However, the more active, pluralistic, resourceful, institutionalized, and democratic is civil society, and the more effectively it balances the tensions in its relations with the state--between autonomy and cooperation, vigilance and loyalty, skepticism and trust, assertiveness and civility--the more likely it is that democracy will emerge and endure.[77]

Thus as one component of civil society, the church can provide practical experience in building democratic life. And it can point to a vision of a different way of life through its preaching and teaching. The unique position of the church in a society gives it the potential to make meaningful contributions to democratization. It is a visible institution. It has staying power. It has a theological basis for challenging structures of power.

In Mexico, the Catholic church has sometimes made significant use of this unique potential to act as an agent of change; at other times it has played the role of

[76]Daniel Levine, *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 300.

[77]Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society," 16.

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legitimizer of the status quo. The following chapter provides a historical overview of the relationship of the church to political development in Mexico.

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CHAPTER TWO

What's Past Is Prologue: The Historical Roots of Religion and Politics in Mexico

> My children: a new dispensation comes to us today. Will you receive it? Will you free yourselves? Will you recover the lands stolen three hundred years ago from your forefathers by the hated Spaniards? . . . Will you not defend your religion and your rights as true patriots? Long live our Lady of Guadalupe! Death to bad government!
>
> Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla
> September 16, 1810[1]

Given the breadth and depth with which social scientists have studied the relationship of the Catholic church to political development in Latin America, the dearth of works focusing on Mexico is striking. Staunch anti-clericalism adopted as official state policy in 1857 and later underscored and strengthened in 1917 has reinforced the notion that the church has played little or no important role in Mexico's political development. Perhaps giving more weight than is merited to official policy and constitutional mandates, most observers ignore the church and tend to examine other institutions and forces in their study of the Mexican political system. Yet the importance of Catholicism in Mexico should not be underestimated. Between eighty-nine and ninety-five percent of the Mexican people consider themselves Catholic.[2] Catholicism is a key component of Mexican national identity. It has been for almost five hundred years. Throughout its long and varied history the church has played the part of the oppressor, and the champion of the oppressed; it has borne the brunt of oppression as well.

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[1]Quoted in Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 287.

[2]George W. Grayson, *The Church in Contemporary Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1992), xiii; and Denis Goulet, "The Mexican Church: Into the Public Arena," *America* (8 April 1989): 320.

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Colonization to Independence

The church's part in the "pacification" of the indigenous people in Mexico is well-known. That there were also religious leaders who championed indigenous rights is less widely discussed. Given the title "Protector of the Indians" in 1516, Bartolomé de Las Casas was one of the most influential voices raised on behalf of the indigenous people. A native of Spain, Las Casas himself started out as a colonist and *encomendero*.[3] After witnessing a massacre of Indians in Cuba, he renounced the encomienda system and began to seek the goal he would pursue the rest of his life: an end to the abuse and exploitation of indigenous people. In 1522 Las Casas joined the Dominican order. For the next fifteen years he traveled in the Spanish colonies in Latin America documenting the plight of the indigenous people. In 1539 he returned to Spain, wrote *The Devastation of the Indies*, and met with Emperor Charles V. This time his labors bore fruit and the "Laws for the Government of the Indies and the Good Treatment of the Indians," the New Laws, were passed in 1542. Indian slavery was outlawed and royal officials and religious leaders were forced to give up their grants of Indian tribute. The New Laws outraged New Spain and were rarely enforced. Las Casas's return to New Spain in 1544 as the first bishop of Chiapas was greeted with disdain. After trying for three years to implement the New Laws, only to find his efforts blocked by local officials, Las Casas returned to Spain. There, he continued to champion the cause of justice for the Indians, writing *In Defense of the Indians*, which helped permanently reshape state policy on the issue of indigenous rights.

Bartolomé de Las Casas was not the only priest to play a pivotal role in Mexican politics. The man credited with providing the initial spark for the Mexican independence movement in 1810 was also a priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. He assembled his parishioners before dawn and invoked the name of Mexico's

[3]An *encomienda* was a grant to a landholder of indigenous people and their villages who were under obligation to pay tribute and give labor to the landholder.

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indigenous saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe, as he asked those who had gathered, "Will you free yourselves?"[4]

Hidalgo's haphazard army worked its way south to Mexico City taking, and often pillaging, towns along the way. After winning a battle on the outskirts of Mexico City, Hidalgo decided to retreat rather than attempt to take the capital.[5] Six months later rebel leaders, including Hidalgo, were captured. Hidalgo was excommunicated by the Inquisition and executed.

That José María Morelos y Pavón, a *mestizo* (mixed race) parish priest and former seminary student of Hidalgo, quickly took Hidalgo's place is worthy of note. As priests, Hidalgo and Morelos had been well-educated. Both were inclined to question the existing social and political mores and their positions afforded them access to like-minded intellectuals, as well as to their indigenous parishioners. They were able to draw on the existing institutional structure of the Catholic church (Hidalgo secured the involvement of approximately four hundred priests and, as noted above, initiated the independence movement by assembling his own parishioners) and the authority evoked by the use of religious symbols.

More measured in his tactics than Hidalgo, Morelos managed to isolate Mexico City. He then gathered with Indian, *criollo* (Mexican-born Spaniards) and mestizo representatives, to articulate their demands. The final document produced at this meeting called for an independent Mexico; a break up of large estates; a more equitable distribution of the country's wealth; an end to slavery, government monopolies and the

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[4]Hidalgo's use of the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe is significant. Tradition has it that the Virgin appeared to a recently converted Indian boy, Juan Diego, in 1531. The Virgin, clothed in a simple robe, was a dark-skinned woman. She instructed that a shrine be built in her honor on the hill where she appeared to Juan Diego which was also the site where the Indians worshipped Tonantzin, mother of the gods. The shrine was built and the Virgin of Guadalupe has been a powerful part of Mexican self identity ever since.

[5]His army's numbers had been drastically depleted in previous battles and Hidalgo was not confident that he could control his army were they to emerge victorious in such a pivotal battle as the capture of Mexico City.

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tribute; and universal suffrage.[6] However, while his supporters were gathered the tide turned against them; the Spanish had rallied those who thought the independence movement was becoming too far-reaching in its demands. In the fall of 1815 Morelos was captured, brought to Mexico City, defrocked and executed. The wars for independence continued until 1821 when the Spanish crown, weary of fighting, recognized Mexican independence.

The period following independence was marked by political conflict in which proponents of liberal and conservative political philosophies attempted to assert their dominance. Political scientist Roderic Camp describes Mexican liberalism as "a mixture of borrowed and native ideas that largely rejected Spanish authoritarianism and tradition, and instead drew on Enlightenment ideas from France, England, and the United States."[7] Political liberty, individualism, increased citizen participation in government, freedom of speech and support for small landholders formed the agenda of Mexican liberalism. The liberals viewed the traditionalism and communitarianism of indigenous cultures and the Catholic church as outmoded and detrimental to Mexican progress.[8] Mexican conservatives, on the other hand, pursued a strong central executive, convinced this was imperative to maintain order and encourage economic development. They emphasized industry, rather than the bolstering of the small landholder class, as the way to achieve economic prosperity.[9]

Liberals and conservatives continued to struggle for power throughout much of the nineteenth century. Political instability became the normal state of Mexican affairs. In Chiapas, rebellions took place nearly every year from 1824 through mid-century. Landowners from the Central Valley (the lowland area of Chiapas) embraced an anti-

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[6] Frank Tannenbaum, *Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 39.

[7] Roderic Ai Camp, *Politics in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.

[8] Daniel Levy and Gabriel Székely, *Mexico: Paradoxes of Stability and Change*, 2d ed., (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 25.

[9] Camp, 30.

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clerical liberalism in their efforts to topple the conservative secular and ecclesiastic elite of the Central Highlands. Conservatives made use of the power and sometimes the financial assistance of the church to regain control.[10]

Throughout Mexico the position of the church within society emerged as a key point of contention, the liberals attempting to diminish the church's power and the conservatives attempting to sustain it. Independence left Mexico with a fragile, insecure state and a wealthy, organizationally solid Catholic church.[11] The church was Mexico's largest *latifundista* (large landed estate holder).[12] Besides the wealth generated by its property, the church was ensured a steady stream of income from fees for the administration of the sacraments. The church was responsible in large part for education and oversaw its own legal and intricate patronage system. The church enjoyed immunity before the law. There was strong liberal opposition to the privileged status these various elements afforded the church.

Convinced that such an influential church was an obstacle to prosperity and progress, the liberals pursued secularization. They were proponents of personal liberty and therefore set out to diminish the Catholic church's position as a social institution and to make religion, in the words of noted Mexican political scientist Soledad Loaeza-Lajous, an "exclusively individual phenomenon."[13] But even more compelling was the liberals' belief that private property was the foundation of modern society; hence their intense desire to weaken the position of the church as property owner.

The liberals scored a solid victory when the Ley Lerdo (Lerdo Law) was put in place in 1856 following the decisive victory of liberal forces over the dictator Santa Ana. Written by Secretary of the Treasury Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, the law was

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[10]Thomas Benjamin, *A Rich Land A Poor People: Politics and Society in Modern Chiapas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 12-14.

[11]Grayson, 6.

[12]Roger Bartra, *Agrarian Structure and Political Power in Mexico*, trans. Stephen K. Ault (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 88.

[13]Soledad Loaeza-Lajous, "Continuity and Change in the Mexican Catholic Church," in *Church and Politics in Latin America*, ed. Dermot Keogh (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 276.

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intended to weaken the political and economic status of the church, which liberals believed provided vital support to their conservative opponents. The law required the church to sell any property not used in day-to-day operations. In the following year additional laws were passed mandating that all births, deaths and marriages were to be registered by civil rather than religious authorities, and prohibiting the church from charging exorbitant fees for administering the sacraments. The conservatives, who counted significant members of the church hierarchy among their most committed adherents, actively opposed the anti-clerical policies of the liberal government, creating extremely contentious church-state relations.

In Chiapas, these tensions reached a head in the late 1850s. Following a failed conservative counterrevolution in Chiapas in 1856, Bishop Colima y Rubio and his priests and religious began an ideological campaign against the liberal government. The laity were told not to obey the civil authorities, and to engage in armed resistance. Alarmed by the resulting hostility, Governor Corzo, in 1858, moved the government out of San Cristóbal de Las Casas and into Tuxtla Gutiérrez, a liberal stronghold. Though merely a shadow, a clerical government remained in San Cristóbal well into the twentieth century. In 1859 the church published subversive pastoral letters and continued to encourage armed rebellion. Governor Corzo responded by expelling Bishop Colima y Rubio from Mexico, citing the "threat to public tranquillity" caused by the "obstinate resistance of the clergy."[14]

When Porfirio Díaz assumed the presidency in 1876 church-state relations changed. Although his political roots can be traced to liberalism, Díaz recognized the church's potentially legitimizing role. Unlike his predecessors he did not try to limit or eliminate the church. Instead Díaz embraced and attempted to coopt the church. His administration entered into a relationship with the Catholic church hierarchy which helped to stabilize the Díaz regime. Although it made no fundamental legal alterations,

[14]Benjamin, 18.

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the Díaz government enabled the church to reclaim, at least practically, its key position in society. A slight modification in the Constitution of 1857 permitted the church to own and administer properties required for its work. A few schools and colleges, including a number of seminaries, were allowed to reopen. The church re-established a number of asylums, hospitals and poor houses. And in Mexico City and a few states the publication of Catholic newspapers was permitted.[15] As Loaeza-Lajous points out:

> Instead of destroying [the church], [Díaz] knew how to make use of it by integrating it into the power structure, once he recognized the value of the capacity for social control Catholicism could exert.[16]

Bishop Francisco Orozco y Jeménez of Chiapas, a progressive bishop who labored to create a Catholic utopia after the example of Chiapas' first bishop, Bartolomé de Las Casas, enjoyed a close relationship with Díaz. Díaz consulted him before a new governor of Chiapas was appointed in 1906, and listened to him when that appointee turned out to be "entirely inept."[17]

Revolution and Rebellion

During the three and a half decades in which Díaz held power, the church developed a cozy relationship and a very powerful alliance with the state. Thus when revolt and rebellion confronted the Díaz government in 1910 the Catholic hierarchy was an early target.[18] When the Revolution ended in 1917, anti-clerical (read anti-hierarchical) sentiment emerged with more vigor--and violence--than it had in the nineteenth century. The liberals who regained political control were convinced that a

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[15]Tannenbaum, 131.

[16]Loaeza-Lajous, 278.

[17]Benjamin, 82.

[18]The chaos and disorder of the Mexican Revolution spilled quickly into Chiapas. Opposition to a new interim governor, appointed in 1911, was widespread and led to a rebellion by several thousand Mayas and mestizos. This rebellion has interesting parallels to the Zapatista Uprising in 1994. The Catholic church and the bishop, Francisco Orozco y Jeménez, were immediately accused of fomenting the 1911 rebellion. Like the EZLN, the rebels who were mostly indigenous carried a banner bearing the symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Benjamin, 108.

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basic problem with the Díaz regime (and one reason it endured, impeding political development, as long as it did) was its alliance with the Catholic church hierarchy. They vowed that the church would never again be allowed to recover its social, political or economic strength. The constitution they framed reflected this pledge. Article 130 of the 1917 Constitution was perhaps the most severe statement. Included in it was the claim that "the law does not recognize any personality in religious groupings called churches."[19] According to historian Karl Schmitt, "this article constituted the ultimate punishment, the final restriction: churches ceased to exist in the legal sense."[20]

On April 21, 1926, the bishops of Mexico formally declared their opposition to, among others, Articles 3, 5, 24, 27 and 130 of the Constitution of 1917. Their call for all Catholics to organize to change the Constitution led then-president Plutarco Elías Calles to require all priests to register with the government. The bishops' efforts to convince Congress to rescind this requirement--which effectively amounted to a governmental license for clerical repression--were unsuccessful. The Congress maintained that the clergy had forfeited their citizenship when they refused to obey the Constitution. Tensions between the church and state increased, coming to a head when, on June 24, Calles issued an order which closed all religious schools and expelled all foreign priests from Mexico. The bishops responded by requiring all priests to abandon their parishes on July 31, 1926--the day the law was to take effect. For the next three years a period of bloody warfare ensued known as the Cristero (soldiers for Christ) Rebellion. During the rebellion a coalition of peasants who sought government fulfillment of revolutionary promises of land redistribution, and members

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[19]Quoted in Karl Schmitt, "Church and State in Mexico: A Corporatist Relationship," *The Americas* XX (January 1989): 373.

[20]Ibid.

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of the Federation for the Defense of Religious Liberty joined forces against the government.[21]

In 1929 an agreement was negotiated between the government and the rebels which clarified that priests only needed to be registered if they were nominated by the church, and that churches could provide religious instruction within their own buildings. The church and the state essentially entered into an understanding, much like the one Díaz had secured. The anti-clerical articles in the Constitution remained, but the government would enforce them with "benevolence" as long as the church agreed not to challenge the legitimacy of the government. It is not without significance that this was the same year the National Revolutionary Party (PNR), the forerunner of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI), was founded.[22]

Chiapas was relatively quiet during the Cristero Rebellion. In the 1930s, however, government hostility towards the church in Chiapas resulted in the closing of churches and the burning of parish records and religious objects. The bishop was exiled and place names were changed (San Cristóbal became Ciudad Las Casas, for example).[23]

During this volatile period the Catholic church as an institution entered into a quiescent stage and played a stabilizing and legitimizing role as Mexico consolidated the gains of the revolution. The church hierarchy focused on projects such as providing agricultural training for farmers, helping members secure loans and encouraging religious instruction. They acknowledged that the church must inevitably

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[21]Grayson, 14-15. See also Graham Greene, *The Power and The Glory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971).

[22]Mexico, as Roderic Ai Camp explains, "is a one-party-dominant system encountering only limited opposition from 1929 through 1988, the year in which a splinter group from the official party ran a highly successful campaign. Mexico's system is unusual in that the antecedent of the PRI, the National Revolutionary Party, did not bring the political leadership to power. Rather, the leadership established the party as a vehicle to *remain* in power; the PRI was founded and controlled by the government bureaucracy." Camp, 15.

[23]Benjamin, 185.

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relinquish its role as a powerful political actor at the national level, having watched this power crumble in the preceding years.

Church-state relations began to change again during the presidency of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964). President López Mateos aggravated the church-state "détente" when he imposed mandatory use of PRI-issued school textbooks containing material objectionable to the church. His government's support of Fidel Castro in Cuba further increased tensions. Still the church remained on the sidelines, encouraging the laity to respond to political issues with civic actions. During this time there was an increasing coalescence between the church and the conservative National Action Party (PAN) which adopted a change-oriented agenda.[24]

Vatican II and Medellín: A Challenge to the Church

Pope John XXIII's call in 1959 for a Vatican Council (1962-1965) to modernize the church took the Mexican hierarchy by surprise. During Vatican II the Catholic church experienced significant changes. The church was redefined as a servant of the people, calling into question religious alignments with the powerful. In 1968, the Catholic hierarchy of Latin America gathered in Medellín, Colombia to discern what Vatican II meant for Latin America. A majority of the Mexican hierarchy adopted a traditionalist stance at these gatherings, with one notable exception: Cuernavaca's Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo.[25] His work in Cuernavaca, embracing aspects of Mexican culture such as mariachi music during mass, his radical interpretations of mission and his objections to the church bureaucracy had already drawn reproach from

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[24]Michael Tangeman, *Mexico at the Crossroads: Politics, the Church, and the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 46.

[25]Hannah Stewart-Gambino defines traditionalists as those within the church who "regard authority and the determination of the moral and social guidelines for the church as flowing primarily from the top down from the Vatican through the international church." She notes, although there are exceptions, traditionalists often hold conservative political views. Hannah Stewart-Gambino, "Introduction: New Game, New Rules," in *Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment*, eds. Edward L. Cleary and Hannah Stewart-Gambino (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 6.

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some sectors. Nonetheless, throughout his episcopacy he embraced the changes set out in Vatican II and the subsequent meetings. He adopted a theology of liberation and developed an extensive network of CEBs in his diocese.[26] Nicknamed the red bishop, he became a renowned defender of justice and the rights of the poor.

Much of the Mexican Catholic hierarchy received the ideas and new methods emerging during this period reluctantly. This caused a strain in the Catholic institution which some of the faithful abandoned as too regressive. Thus, in the early 1960s the number of bishops and dioceses increased, while the number of men and women religious and clergy actually decreased.[27] Those priests, religious and laity who were animated by Vatican II and Medellín and remained with the church, engaged in work on behalf of the poor. Organizations like Christians for Socialism and Priests for the People grew rapidly and a vibrant CEB movement flourished in Mexico in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[28]

Still, the events of 1968 provide a sobering glimpse of the tension within the Mexican church as it tried to find its place within a rapidly changing world. The "economic miracle" which followed World War II had provided opportunities for growth particularly among the middle class, but its success was waning. Students protested increasing economic disparities, staging almost fifty demonstrations in the summer of 1968. The protests escalated in mid-August as others joined the students. A rally in the central square of Mexico City attracted some five hundred thousand demonstrators. President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was reportedly acutely aware of the need to protect Mexico's public image, since Mexico was to host the Olympic Games in mid-October. In an effort to quiet the turmoil, President Díaz authorized the use of

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[26]Although Gustavo Gutiérrez originally presented a "theology of liberation" in a lecture in Chimbote, Peru (July 1968), these ideas can be traced back at least as early as *Rerum Novarum*, the social encyclical issued by Leo XIII in 1891. See Chapter One for a more extensive discussion of liberation theology.

[27]Tangeman, 53.

[28]Grayson, 51.

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violence against the protesters--a majority of whom were students, housewives and office workers. There followed the Tlatelolco massacre. On October 2, 1968, a demonstration was held in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the District of Tlatelolco to denounce the government's failure to meet demands regarding the release of political prisoners, the cessation of police brutality and the initiation of dialogue in order to address increasing economic disparities.[29] The army and police opened fire, killing hundreds of protesters and bystanders.

Where was the church during the upheaval of 1968? As the protests were intensifying and the government response growing more harsh, a number of the Mexican hierarchy were attending the bishops' gathering in Medellín, Colombia. In Medellín, Mexico's Archbishop Miguel Darío Miranda was spearheading the opposition to the meeting's draft document which denounced the institutional violence and structural oppression afflicting the poor in Latin America. Miranda maintained that these issues were not relevant in all of Latin America and certainly not in Mexico.

In Mexico, Bishop Mendez Arceo, the only member of the episcopacy to sympathize publicly with the protesters, joined religious activists to draft a declaration, "To the Mexican People," signed by thirty-seven priests, which upheld some of the protesters' demands. Archbishop Miranda rebuked, from Medellín, the declaration as misrepresenting the position of the church. Bishop Samuel Ruiz García of Chiapas who was in attendance at Medellín, by all accounts, failed to recognize the severity of the problem in Mexico.

On October 2, the day of the massacre, the Church of Santiago, Tlatelolco, closed its doors to protesters fleeing the slaughter and later its priests refused to say a funeral mass for those who were killed.[30] The church's response to the events of 1968

[29]Meyer and Sherman, 667-671. According to historians Michael Meyer and William Sherman, "The Olympic Games themselves were notably free of turbulence, and it appeared that the violence had spent itself. . . . The fires of Tlatelolco had been largely extinguished, but social smoldering would continue to choke the country for years."

[30]Tangeman, 52.

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provides a painful illustration of the chasm that had developed between those who had chosen to affirm a change-oriented theology, calling for an increased role for the church in addressing social justice and those who were more conservative and resisted this reorientation.

Constitutional Changes: Relations Restored and Reproved

Eleven years later, in 1979, Pope John Paul II made Mexico the site of his first international trip. The Pope's visit was important for a number of reasons. First, the Pope's reason for coming to Mexico was to attend the third assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), where he attempted to quell the growing social activism in the Latin American Catholic church and steer a middle ground spiritually through his condemnation of the more radical interpretations of liberation theology and admonitions against church participation in partisan politics.[31] Second, the sheer magnitude of his reception revitalized the Mexican church. Fifteen million people attended the masses and parades which marked the Pope's visit. Millions more watched the daily broadcasts on television or listened to the proceedings on the radio.[32] Third, the Pope and the Mexican hierarchy parlayed some of the benefits of his warm reception into political collateral which would be used to strengthen the church's relationship with the state and ultimately secure full legal status for religious institutions.

This goal--the restoration of the church as a legal entity--though slow in coming, was realized during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). Many believe had it not been for electoral fraud, Salinas would have lost the election to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, former governor, former PRI member and son of Lázaro Cárdenas (president of Mexico from 1934-1940). The fraud which characterized the

[31]Grayson, 55.
[32]Ibid.

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1988 presidential campaign was publicly denounced by elements within the base and the hierarchy of the Catholic church. The results of that election, in which the PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari received only a bare majority, struck a political nerve. In response to the weaknesses in the political system (which had governed Mexico for more than fifty years) exposed by the election, the Mexican government moved to reinvigorate its relationship with the church. Though Protestant churches were gaining members, Mexico was still a predominantly Catholic country.[33] Catholic symbols continued to command central roles in cultural ceremonies and acceptance of religious authority was widespread. Hence Salinas hoped to strengthen his political base by affiliating himself more closely with the Catholic church. Some members of the Catholic hierarchy (Cardinal Adolfo Suarez of Monterrey for example) were very receptive to the Salinas administration's overtures; however, a majority of the base and a small number of the hierarchy embraced, albeit chaotically, the political opposition led by Cárdenas.[34]

In spite of his weak political mandate Salinas embarked on a bold economic and political modernization program for Mexico. His administration put in place initiatives which privatized state-owned companies, diminished food subsidies and import barriers and controlled bureaucratic growth.[35] He also made moves toward democratization. For example, he accepted the victory of a PAN gubernatorial candidate in Baja California in mid-1989.

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[33]Daniel Levine and David Stoll point to numerous factors which account for the groundswell of interest in Protestant churches including demographic changes, social mobility and the appeal of religions that stress an intense spiritual life. Daniel H. Levine and David Stoll, "Bridging the Gap Between Empowerment and Power in Latin America," in *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, eds. Susan Hoeber Rudolph and James Piscatori (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997). On this subject also see, Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll, eds. *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

[34]The church's posture tends to parallel the political situation. The conservative PAN, aligned with the Catholic hierarchy, tends to be stronger in the north and the Left opposition party, Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which grew out of the Cárdenas candidacy, has drawn the majority of its support from the south where the church is more progressive.

[35]See Philip L. Russell, *Mexico Under Salinas* (Austin: Mexico Resource Center, 1994).

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Though the gross domestic product grew nearly three percent in 1990 and over four percent in 1991, the Salinas administration drew fire from many sectors. Poor Mexicans bore the weight of and reaped scant benefit from the dramatic economic restructuring. Business elite, large landowners and party bosses disliked their loss of status.

The church, on the other hand, was somewhat insulated from this growing distrust and dissatisfaction by its independence from the government. In fact it enjoyed widespread public approval as the only national organization receiving no government funding nor subject to any government controls. At the same time, the independence of the church evidently worried PRI officials. A 1988 internal PRI memo warned that this autonomy "could permit [the church] to conquer evermore political space and, like it or not, this would come at the expense of the state's power."[36] So it is not surprising that Salinas continued to turn to the church as he attempted to calm stormy political seas.

To the delight of many members of the Catholic hierarchy, on November 1, 1991, Salinas declared his intention to normalize church-state relations and re-establish relations with the Vatican, which had been severed for over a century. On January 28, 1992, amendments to five constitutional articles were approved by Congress. As journalist Michael Tangeman explains, "After seventy-five years of legal limbo, [the Catholic bishops] were thankful that the very existence of religion was finally recognized in Mexico's constitution."[37]

Amendments affecting the fate of religious institutions were not the only constitutional changes which Salinas managed to secure during his tenure. Salinas

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[36]Grayson, 70.
[37]Tangeman, 82.

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hoped to convince future trading partners, Canada and the United States, that Mexico was ready to enter the arena of first world economies, of which the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was the most powerful expression. Claiming Mexico's *ejido* system of land distribution perpetuated inefficient use of land resources and needed to be eliminated in order to modernize the agricultural system in preparation for NAFTA, the Salinas administration amended Article 27 of the Constitution which had legalized the ejido system.[38] This action ended a land reform program which, although not without problems, had provided Mexico's landless with their only hope that they might someday own land. NAFTA was passed in 1993, despite strong opposition from Bishop Samuel Ruiz, whose vigorous campaign against it earned him the hostility of President Salinas.[39] NAFTA's provisions allowing foreign investment in land and cheap agricultural imports from the United States seemed a direct threat to Mexico's millions of subsistence farmers.

Philip Russell points to the situation faced by corn producers who would be particularly hard hit. He notes that "given disadvantageous conditions, the production of a ton of corn in eastern Chiapas can take up to 300 days of labor. The Mexican

[38]The ejido system refers to an Indian concept of village-owned lands. After 1915 the Mexican government adopted this system in order to distribute land to residents in rural villages. The land was held in common by those who obtained usage rights although no legal title was granted. This policy remained in place until it was terminated in 1992 by constitutional changes. For a more detailed discussion of the impact of the revision of Article 27 see Neil Harvey, *Rebellion in Chiapas: Rural Reforms, Campesino Radicalism, and the Limits to Salinismo* (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1994).

[39]"Indian Conflict in Chiapas: A Chronology," *Akwe:kon A Journal of Indigenous Issues* (Summer 1994): 49.

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average is eight days, and the U.S. average is 0.15 days."[40] The passage of NAFTA served to solidify the disillusionment and despair of Mexico's rural poor.

Opposition to NAFTA ran high in the state of Chiapas. One of the three poorest states in Mexico, Chiapas has been called a "rich land with a poor people."[41] Hydroelectric stations in Chiapas produce fifty-five to sixty percent of the country's electricity, yet thirty-five percent of the people living in Chiapas do not have access to electricity. Twenty-one percent of Mexico's oil and forty-seven percent of its natural gas comes from Chiapas. The southernmost state in Mexico, Chiapas yields more than half of Mexico's coffee crop. Forty-two percent of its inhabitants do not have running water. Sixty-two percent of the adults of Chiapas do not finish primary school.[42] On the day NAFTA was to take effect, January 1, 1994, an insurrection erupted, seemingly out of nowhere. The Zapatistas had timed their uprising in the highlands of Chiapas to coincide with the implementation of the agreement which they considered to be commensurate to a death sentence for Mexico's rural poor.

As they had nearly five centuries earlier, the many religious leaders and catequistas of the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, though rejecting violent means, stood with the indigenous people in their opposition. And as had also happened many times before, the church did not speak with one voice in its response to the unrest. Sectors of the church which sought to solidify the church's realignment with the political power structure considered the uprising, particularly the

[40]Russell, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 17. See also Jeffrey Wollock, "Globalizing Corn: Technocracy and the Indian Farmer," *Akwe:kon A Journal of Indigenous Issues* (Summer 1994): 53-66.
[41]Benjamin.
[42]Russell, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 12.

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proximity of the pastoral work in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas to the indigenous people, a direct and dangerous threat.

The Catholic church has been a critical influence on Mexican politics since its inception. Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first bishop of Chiapas, was moved to advocate on behalf of the indigenous people. His efforts ultimately led Spain to reshape its legal relationship to indigenous people throughout mesoamerica. Fathers Morelos and Hidalgo parlayed religious position into political power when they spearheaded calls for Mexican independence in the nineteenth century. Others within the Catholic church have, at times, enjoyed the benefits derived from holding a privileged position at the center of Mexico's political elite. In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, building on the legacy of Las Casas, much of the church has chosen to challenge a socio-economic and political system it has deemed corrupt and unjust. In the early years of the period under consideration (1960-1994) the church struggled to find its political voice. Over thirty years later, finding faithful, effective ways to respond to the needs of the indigenous people was still a struggle. Yet by this time the church's calls for and support of democratization were unequivocal. Whether the fruits of their labor reflect this commitment is the subject at hand.

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CHAPTER THREE

Liberation Democracy: The Theological Rationale of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Samuel Ruiz García

Religious leaders--catequistas, pastoral agents, priests and religious--in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico are participating in the pursuit of democracy. Involvement of the Catholic church with the indigenous communities, which comprise the majority of the constituents of the diocese, has enhanced the already strong potential that these communities would influence democratization. The church has made at least three important contributions. It has provided a theological rationale for political involvement, the identification and development of skills and resources, and a vehicle for communication among the various indigenous communities and between indigenous communities and the religious and political power structures. By far the most important contribution of the diocese has been the construction of a theological rationale for political participation which will be the focus of this chapter.

As Daniel Levine observes, the ways in which theology--the way in which God and God's relationship to the world is understood--is made manifest can promote powerful political acts: "The assertion by subordinate groups of a right to sacred power and a capacity for autonomous interpretation and action is a conflict-charged and, in this sense, necessarily a political act."[1] But more than simply promoting powerful political acts, Levine explains, religious change can contribute to the theory and practice of democracy. He asserts:

> Three issues are critical. The first points to the role religious change can play in breaking the culture of silence in which the powerless find themselves. The second underscores the emergence of new leadership strata, and of an image of leadership that advances hitherto unknown norms of accountability. The third addresses the general impact associational life can have for the powerless by providing practical

[1]Levine, *Popular Voices*, 321.

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> experience in democracy along with a shield, however minimal at first, behind which individuals and groups can begin to change. In combination, these elements undergird the extension of democracy to marginal groups and the creation of a place for them as active and responsible citizens.[2]

In the following four chapters ample evidence is provided of each of Levine's issues: the breaking of the culture of silence, the emergence of new leadership and practical experience of democracy, and likewise the (very gradual) extension of democracy in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas; but it is impossible to understand fully the church's role in this process without examining that which enables the religious institution to make any contribution at all--the theological foundation upon which the church is constructed. It is its theological component, and the pastoral activity which grows out of that theology, which distinguishes the church from all other organizations and institutions.

Theological Rationale for Political Involvement

> The fundamental course of our plan can be explained as: a diocesan church which lives and proclaims the Good News and the practice of Jesus, which announces and constructs the Kingdom of God, which denounces injustice; a church which, like Jesus, opts for the poor, who are destined for the Kingdom . . . the incarnation of the indigenous cultures and the insertion of the Chiapaneco people in the liberation process, and the acknowledgment of the importance of accompaniment in conscientization and organization. . . .[3] (Diocesan Plan of 1988)

The bishop of the diocese, Samuel Ruiz García, has played a critical role in shaping the theological rationale of the diocese. The son of migrant workers, Ruiz was born in 1924 in Irapuato, Guanajuato. He was ordained in 1949 in the Seminario Conciliar de León. He studied in León and in Rome, graduating from the Pontifica

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[2]Ibid., 340.

[3]Samuel Ruiz García, *Informe Quinquenal Ad Limina* (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 1988), 65, photocopied.

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Universidad Gregoriana. He speaks seven languages: Spanish, French, Italian, German, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and English, and reads Greek, Latin and Hebrew. In 1960, at the age of thirty-five, Ruiz was named bishop of Chiapas where he remains today. Bishop Ruiz is one of the few Mexican bishops still active who participated in Vatican II and Medellín.

Careful study of the 1988 *Ad Limina* (the progress report sent to the Vatican by the bishop every five years), *En esta hora de gracia* (Bishop Ruiz's pastoral letter written on the occasion of Pope John Paul II's visit to the Yucatan peninsula in 1993), diocesan plans, statements and declarations, documents from the diocesan assemblies, interviews with Bishop Ruiz as well as his numerous homilies and seasonal messages to the people of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas provide a basis for understanding the theology espoused by the diocese.

Sources of Authority

How does this theological rationale for political participation arise in Chiapas? In addition to text, tradition and reason, there are at least three sources of authority for this theological rationale, particular to the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas: the legacy of Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1566); the teachings of Vatican II (1962-1965) and Medellín (1968); and the reality of Chiapas. In his 1993 pastoral letter Bishop Ruiz explains:

> . . . the historic diocese of Chiapas, whose first bishop was Bartolomé de Las Casas, strong defender of the indigenous and implacable critic of the colonial system, has been distinguished by its pastoral line; the ominous reality which he confronted, continues to prevail. Especially after the Second Vatican Council, the insertion of the pastoral agents of the diocese (priests, religious and committed laity) in a conflicted reality

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> was carrying us along a long path which also has been a long conversion process.[4]

In this passage Ruiz lays out three sources of authority for the theological rationale. First is the historical legacy of Bartolomé de Las Casas. As the first bishop of the diocese, Ruiz explains that the local church is "sealed principally with evangelical loyalty to Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas," and thus, "has opted, in the last decades, to occupy its place in the margins of society and with the very poor."[5] Bishop Carrasco of the neighboring state of Oaxaca refers to the responsibility of those who follow in the path laid out by Bartolomé de Las Casas:

> The Bishops of the Pacific South Region in some way feel we are the inheritors of the prophetic trajectory of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, even though we recognize that we do not have sufficient courage, perseverance and congruence which the first bishop of this place had. He will continue to be a model for us, the pastors of today.[6]

Second, the teachings emerging from Vatican II and Medellín have had a strong influence on the work of the diocese, helping to place the work within a global context. Ruiz describes his own participation in these gatherings as "providential." (At the Medellín gathering he became president of the Episcopal Commission of Indigenous Pastoral Work.)[7] Ruiz describes how the poverty and destitution he found upon his arrival to Chiapas left him feeling overwhelmed and helpless. Participating in the Second Vatican Council and Medellín gave him hope, and a way to begin pastoral work among the poor. Looking back on this time, Ruiz recalls:

> We were very worried by a tremendous need. When I arrived here, it was as if you felt like crying. It was as if a neutron bomb had fallen . . . and destroyed life but left standing the material infrastructure, the buildings, etc. This was how I imagined Chiapas, as the result of a

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[4]Samuel Ruiz García, *Carta Pastoral: En esta hora de gracia* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Dabar, octubre 1993), 19.

[5]Ibid., 19.

[6]Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño, *Homilía Jubilar: Bodas de plata episcopales de Mons. Samuel Ruiz García* (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, 25 enero 1985), vi.

[7]Samuel Ruiz García, "Marco teológico de la opción diocesana," *Caminante* 44 (enero-marzo 1987): 17.

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> cleaning bomb which finished off everything, left the natural world very beautiful, but the situation of the people lamentable. Where to begin? making needles to sew clothes, or making plows to work the land and begin to have food? They asked me about the principal problems of Chiapas and I responded: "I do not have many problems--only one--and it is very big: the hunger and pain of many people."
>
> Then, in the middle of this anguish, the Concilio arrived and gave us clues, and after, Medellín came and engaged us in a path which had concrete pastoral repercussions. For example, we were a diocese with very few pastoral agents; we sent thirteen people to Mexico for a year to prepare themselves anthropologically, with a very severe sacrifice, but with the conviction that through the reflections of the Concilio and of Medellín we had to realize embodied pastoral work. This resulted in liberating evangelism and the option for the poor.[8]

For Ruiz, and many others who attended these gatherings, the most important theme was the church of the poor. Ruiz believed that the option for the poor was not an option but a necessity. He said, "without it the church will not discover that which it is, nor will be that which it tries to be or that which it must be."[9] Though enemies and advocates alike have tried to attribute a theological course to the bishop, he rejects these efforts claiming the Concilio sets his course: "With some preoccupation I hear said many times: 'We are in the line of Don Samuel' and this worries me because I do not have *my* line; I have one: the Conciliar line."[10]

Third, the reality of Chiapas--the ominous, conflicted reality--with which pastoral agents were confronted has played an important role in developing pastoral work. During Vatican II, Pope John XXIII called on the church to learn to read the "signs of the times," to study and respond to the reality within which the church was situated. When the Latin American bishops began this process they found that reading the signs of the times in the Latin American context was, according to Ruiz, "to discover the situation of poverty. Our problem was not meeting with non-believing

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[8]Ibid., 18.
[9]Ibid., 24.
[10]Ibid., 18.

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men, but with non-men believers. Exactly the inverse of Europe."[11] In Chiapas indigenous people faced a constant battle with government officials to preserve or re-secure communal lands. The population in eastern Chiapas increased from five thousand inhabitants in 1960 to almost three hundred thousand in the mid-1990s, straining the land the indigenous people did possess to unbearable limits. In addition, in much of the region health care and educational facilities were almost non-existent. Human rights abuses against the indigenous people were on the rise as the government attempted to discourage indigenous opposition to what the indigenous people perceived as oppressive government policies.[12]

In the following pages, the five major theological assumptions which comprise the theological rationale of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas will be examined: (1) poverty and suffering are not consonant with the will of God; (2) the experience of poverty and suffering may lead to conversion; (3) change in society is possible through the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ; (4) the church is a catalyst for the construction of the Kingdom of God; and (5) the church is called to accompany the poor in their religious and political struggle.

These five assumptions provide the theological rationale for political involvement of those engaged in the pastoral work of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The assumptions are riddled with paradoxes which can only be understood from a faith perspective because in the end it is this element which distinguishes and empowers the church.

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[11]Ibid., 20.

[12]Russell, *Chiapas Rebellion*, 1-19.

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Theological Rationale

1. Poverty and suffering are not consonant with the will of God.

There is a strong tension which animates this assumption: on the one hand poverty and suffering are not willed by God, but on the other, conversion (and the ultimate goal--redemption) is only possible through a connection with the poor and suffering. How has the church interpreted God's perspective on poverty? The church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas has responded to this phenomenon by choosing an "option for the poor." What are the ramifications of this "choice," for the poor? For the rich?

Bishop Ruiz explains what he believes to be God's perspective on poverty, that it is not God's will that people should be poor:

> Constantly facing the challenges of modernity and the harshness of neoliberalism, we lift our voice together with that of the prophets, to say, like them and together with them, that poverty--the lack of goods that this situation generates--is bad and totally contrary to the will of God.[13]

The definition of poverty employed by Ruiz throughout his tenure in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, is a material definition. In his words it is "the lack of goods." The interpretation of poverty as spiritual deprivation, of being poor in spirit, is not used even though the need to develop a solid spiritual foundation is considered essential.

Poverty, the condition in which the majority of the indigenous people and campesinos in the Diocese of San Cristóbal live, is, according to Bishop Ruiz, incompatible with the will of God. This assertion is made repeatedly and aggressively in homilies, catechetical courses, pastoral letters and other official church documents. More than simply announcing that poverty is incompatible with the will of God, the church has tried to locate the cause of poverty and suggest means by which it might be

[13]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 18.

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eradicated. These efforts have been used, by some within the church, as a means of challenging a seemingly unmovable system.

Bishop Ruiz began to focus on the problem of poverty when he came into contact with the concepts of the church of the poor and the church's preferential option for the poor at Vatican II and later at Medellín. In 1987 Ruiz described the poor as, "those who are the fruit of a dysfunctioning of social structures."[14] In the same discussion, he explains that choosing to be on the side of the poor is really no choice at all:

> . . . the church in Latin America opts for the poor, not because it would be an option to opt or not, to be on the side of the rich or of the poor, or now we opt because we will win for opting, no! This option is the evangelical option. The Latin American church decides to opt because it discovers tragically that in the face of the problem of structural domination, consciously or unconsciously, the church found itself to be in alliance with domination and as such it must pass over to the side of the poor. When it discovered in an analysis that poverty is the fruit of domination, not a historical eventuality, that it is not a chance but a causal thing, then the church had to opt for the poor, because the other way we are in domination and certainly would not be in an evangelical position.[15]

Ruiz is locating the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in the context of the Latin American church. Ruiz's option thus is not isolated from, but in concert with, much of the Latin American church. By positioning his diocese in this way, he adds to the legitimacy of his efforts. This option for the poor is a rejection of the church's identification with the oppressor and a movement toward the side of the poor--it is this side, according to Ruiz, which is in line with the Gospel. The implication is that prior to their own conscientization process during Vatican II, Medellín and Puebla, church leaders in the diocese did not realize poverty was caused by a dominance with which

[14]Ruiz, "Marco teológico," 27.
[15]Ibid.

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the church itself was closely allied. Once this became apparent, the church had no choice but to realign itself with the poor.

Now the church's shift to the side of the poor, at least in Ruiz's perception, is central to its self-definition. In an interview where he criticized the North American Free Trade Agreement's lack of consideration for the poor, Ruiz maintains:

> The day that the church of the poor is interred, the whole church is interred. John XXIII said that the church is a light, a light for all people and will not be a church of all people if it is not of the poor. If the poor are forgotten, it will be a foreign and dominating church.[16]

Ruiz implies that the poor are at the heart of the church and those who are not poor must find ways to relate to a church of the poor. Ruiz does not claim that if the church of the poor is not given priority, the church will cease to exist. Instead he asserts that such a church will be locked away in a tomb unable to do that which it is called to do. It will be a domineering foreigner to those who had loved and cared for it.[17]

If poverty is unacceptable to God, so is the accumulation of unjust riches which keeps the poor in poverty. Ruiz makes this clear in the 1988 *Ad Limina*:

> The poor accept with delight the announcement of the love of the Father, of the redemption of the Son and the force of the Spirit, and they put into practice the mandate of love with enthusiasm. . . . The rich, possessors of *unjust riches,* unable to serve two masters, reject the demands of justice, they turn against the church and strengthen the complaint of Christ: *How difficult is it for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God?* The different responses of the poor and the rich to the announcement of the Gospel creates division and contradiction within houses and provokes grave conflicts between them and against those that announce love and justice. The rich turn more furiously against the church since the church removes the mask and is no longer being used to strengthen and bless the power of the oppressor

[16]César Romero, "Samuel Ruiz: Los cambios, en función del TLC," *Voz y Voto* (septiembre 1993): 15.

[17]But all people are not poor. How do those *more* fortunate fit into the religious scenario? This question is discussed below.

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> which the upper classes exercise against the poor, supporting a religiosity of the Pharisees.[18]

This passage raises some key issues in the discussion of the church and poverty. First, Ruiz has engaged in broad rhetorical generalizations regarding the rich and the poor in the diocese. Are all the rich possessors of unjust riches? Do all the poor joyfully accept the love of God? This sort of over-simplification makes powerful rhetoric but provides a questionable analytic framework, a common occurrence in liberation theology.[19] Actually much of the power of liberation theology--the power to inspire, to organize and to mobilize--is derived from this rhetorical simplicity.

This passage also highlights the clash between the rich and the poor, raising questions about the role of the rich in a church which claims a preferential option for the poor. The wealthy took great exception to the diocesan process as it moved in this direction.[20] The diocese was forced to confront the question, is the church open to all? If it is not, who is in and who is out? If it is, how does it function? What transforms a church formerly on the side of the rich to a church on the side of the poor or to a church divided? In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Ruiz joined a number of bishops in the spring of 1994 in issuing a statement proclaiming the church was large enough for all people but it was not clear that all people felt welcome. In the eyes of the rich the church leadership, which never tires of proclaiming its allegiance to the poor and by its encouragement of the ministry of the catequistas, had transformed their church into a church of the poor. Thus the reality mirroring the situation throughout much of Latin America and the world is that the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas is a church divided. There is nothing noble, then, about suffering or poverty. They do, however, have potential roles to play in bringing the

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[18]Ruiz, *Ad Limina*, 21.

[19]This is not to say that some liberation theology is not a highly developed, sophisticated theology--it is. See Chapter One for a more complete analysis of liberation theology.

[20]See Chapters Six and Seven for a discussion of the ways in which some of the wealthy responded to the theological rationale of the diocese.

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political order closer to the will of God. How do encounters with poverty and suffering lead to the conversion of individuals, society and the church?

2. Encounters with poverty and suffering may lead to conversion.

The 1988 *Ad Limina* points to conversion as a way out of poverty. The root of the grave conflicts in the diocese, according to the passage quoted above, found in the "beliefs" section of the *Ad Limina,* are precipitated by a clash between the rich and the poor. Ruiz describes the results of this clash as: assassinations; no schools for the indigenous; blocking the ministry of the catequistas; exploitation of indigenous people by business people; hunger; etc. Ruiz is arguing that misunderstanding, or rejecting, the word of God (as some of the rich do) is directly connected to social, political and economic evils prevalent in society; if all people were to accept the word of God (as some of the poor have done), the evils of the world would be made right.

The conversion of the indigenous people was no exception. Ruiz notes that Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas called the conversion of the indigenous people "a miracle against nature."[21] Ruiz elaborates:

> There were economic factors which characterized the evangelization of the new world: to find a shorter way between Spain and India, to lower the market price of spices . . . the sword and the cross came together to carry out a political and spiritual enslavement. Honest recollections of the invaders cannot hide the shame of the massacres; the voracity for precious metals and the eagerness to enslave in the altars of production had extended slavery in vast regions of Africa. . . . Evangelism was stained with the miserable exploitation of the Indian. . . .
>
> And even though, being just, we have to acknowledge the self-sacrificing and good-intentioned labor of the missionaries, the Indians were faced with the visible contradiction of having to accept a faith in the Señor, creator of life, announced by those who exterminated life. For this our Bartolomé de Las Casas affirmed that the conversion of the

[21]Samuel Ruiz García, "El conflicto de la religión," *CENCOS* (noviembre 1993): 24.

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> Indians was a miracle against nature: because "How could they believe in God, giver of life, announced by those who exterminated life?"[22]

One more cynical than Las Casas might conclude that the Indians' conversion was not so much a miracle as it was a pragmatic attempt to stave off the wrath of the conquistadors and the missionaries. The indigenous people wanted to stay alive so they "converted." In other words, the indigenous people of Chiapas adopted the Christian faith as a survival mechanism; they kept their own beliefs and traditions while using Christian symbols (i.e. Jesus Christ was another name for the sun).[23]

According to Ruiz, after Vatican II, the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas tried to apply the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and realized that, "a large majority of their faithful did not know the fundamental truths of the faith. . . ." Indigenous people made every effort to avoid the priests and religious, whom they believed would condemn traditional religious practice as heresy. For this reason, Ruiz maintained, many indigenous people had not really experienced conversion. They were marginalized, exploited and oppressed by society. Their basic rights and social well-being were threatened because, in the end, they remained outside of the church.[24]

Ruiz is arguing that if *real* spiritual conversion, a process which became clear to him in the context of Vatican II, were to take place, this would help eradicate the marginalization and exploitation of the indigenous people in his diocese. He identifies a link between spiritual conversion (or lack thereof) and the material problems the indigenous people face. The absence of *real* spiritual conversion has contributed to the oppression of the indigenous community. Gradually, Ruiz claims, the Catholic church in his diocese, mainly through the work of the catequistas, has begun to embrace and incorporate indigenous culture into Catholic religious practices. So today, most

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[22]Ruiz, "El conflicto de la religión," 25.

[23]Hernán Cortés, a pious Catholic, was accompanied by five priests in 1519 when he subjugated the Aztecs. The Spaniards who followed Cortés to Mexico tried to convert the Indians to Catholicism and exploit their labor.

[24]Ruiz, *Ad Limina*, 19.

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indigenous Catholics, through their interaction with one or more of the over eight thousand catequistas serving this diocese, have, according to Ruiz, experienced a *real* spiritual conversion. If injustice is to be overcome, in addition to the *real* spiritual conversion of the indigenous people, those who are rich must also be converted.

Spiritual conversion is linked to the solution of "secular" problems. Again the problem of oversimplification emerges. Who are the rich who must be converted? People in the diocese? In the state of Chiapas? In the country of Mexico? In the world? Clearly conversion of the rich, whatever the arena, is a fantastical goal, so why does Ruiz raise this issue again and again during his ministry? He raises the issue precisely because he is in ministry, because a theological assumption is not rooted in political, economic or sociological analysis. It is rooted in faith in God.

Ruiz acknowledges that conversion of individuals, society and the church is incomplete, and thus social, political and economic problems persist. So he explores an appropriate and effective Christian response to the injustice facing the people of Chiapas produced by incomplete conversion:

> Taking into account all that came before, it is no cause for surprise that in spite of having many resources in Chiapas, such poverty exists and one asks oneself how can we be in agreement, as Chiapanecos and even more as Christians, with a system in which such riches are carried away and such misery is left behind and the little that remains is unjustly distributed?[25]

This is *the* question that the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas is trying to answer. How, when so much inequality and injustice are present, can they as citizens of Chiapas and more importantly as Christians accept the system which perpetuates these iniquities? The answer that is implied is that they cannot. Instead Ruiz describes how these very hardships potentially facilitate a sort of

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[25]Ibid., 6.

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conversion within the diocese, enabling even those who are not living in poverty to understand and respond to the will of God:

> The suffering of our people is the point of departure of a long path, of a transforming process of conversion, of a pressing demand for answers which thrusts us into the salvific mediation of the indigenous world (poor among poor), waiting for an inevitable evangelical response.[26]

Conversion is a long path; it is a process which urgently pursues solutions and as such leads to an encounter with the poor who wait for the Good News [of the return of Christ] which they know is coming. In 1979, during a pastoral gathering held on the occasion of Bishop Ruiz's twentieth anniversary, fourteen bishops from throughout Latin America gathered to discuss evangelism and the indigenous world. The bishops agreed:

> There is significant tension in trying to discern creatively the meaning and limits of accompaniment. This tension can be called conversion. We have to persuade ourselves that there is no one who is confirmed in liberation. It is necessary to question continually our preoccupation with and tensions toward the liberation of the people, and why evangelism accompanies this concrete step in which these people find themselves.[27]

Conversion is a process that is never complete. It happens continuously to individuals and society. It is a path filled with tension. This type of theology demands vigilance; the work is never finished, the goal never fully achieved. But it also offers the possibility of claiming victory even when there is more to be done. This is a very powerful religious, and political, tool; people feel successful even when their victory is not complete, so they are encouraged to continue to struggle. This was true at the end of the Xi'Nich March, discussed in detail in Chapter Seven. Overcoming poverty and suffering is a rather tall order; it is easy for people to get discouraged. The idea of a continuous conversion creates the motivation to persist.

[26]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 22.

[27]Fr. Pablo Iribarren, O.P. y Comunidades de San Cristóbal y Ocosingo, *Experiencia: Proceso de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico* (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 29 abril 1985), 23, photocopied.

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Ruiz is suggesting that conversion is an individual and communal process. Just as each person must be converted, society and the church must be converted. None of these processes can be complete until each is complete. For the church this means essentially adopting a vow of poverty, a powerful statement in light of the ecclesial history of the Latin American church. Ruiz explains, "Therefore a church which opts for the poor must pass through a process of conversion to make itself a church with the poor and, definitely, a poor church."[28]

Conversion involves a response to poverty which moves beyond simply offering material aid and promotes systemic change through personal action. Again Ruiz is making a connection between the individual and corporate nature of this process:

> I do not have the right to live like this, because I am contributing to the crushing of the society, but what way out do I have? What is it I must do? Share stoves and radios with the people who pass on the street? Maybe that would be a good work, but it would not resolve the situation. There are two things which I think I must do and am doing: First, not accumulate more, because I think accumulation is exactly the problem--an accumulation of riches in the hands of few. Therefore it follows that I will not participate in the accumulation. . . . Second, in my business I have instituted a new way of acting. I am no longer worried about how much I earn, but how much everyone earns. . . .[29]

Ruiz is proposing a very personal response to poverty which clearly has communal or societal ramifications.

It was encounters with the people's suffering, living with the people on a daily basis, that helped transform or convert the diocese:

> In the process of liberation of the people and our own process of solidarity there are different fronts of the same battle. There are reactions of the powerful who are going to strike out with repression and defamation. There are also reactions of the dominant groups within the church. These groups are not going to change without changing the dominant groups within society, for there are not double analyses. The church cannot be purified without purifying the society. Therefore, that

[28]Ruiz, "El conflicto de la religión," 28.

[29]Jose Luis Mejias, "El sistema agotó ya sus posibilidades," *El Universal* (10 abril 1978), 12.

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> which must be done is to work in the service of the people making use of the possibilities that there are inside the church.[30]

This link between working to democratize the church and democratizing society is key. The church concluded that one cannot happen without the other since the actors are overlapping. The hearts of the powerful must be changed and then the impact will be felt within the church and within society. In this context the idea of separate spheres for the theological and the political is simply not workable.

As early as 1978 Ruiz acknowledged the social and political ramifications of adopting the option for the poor. The option is at odds with the established order, so proponents of this option are opponents of the system. He explains:

> I think it is normal [that Ruiz's colleagues are accused of being subversive]; in the moment an option for the poor is adopted and one begins to announce the Gospel, in this moment one begins to be subversive, because the Gospel is subversive to the established order; it is subversive against social injustice.[31]

Fifteen years later Ruiz's rejection of the established order takes the shape of a call for democracy. In an interview during the Salinas administration's tenure, Ruiz describes the types of changes he believes Mexico needs:

> The current government is illegitimate; it does not have popular justification. The people do not believe the authorities. Distrust is generalized. There is a conviction held by all: the system is bad, and the problem is not a person; the problem is not the driver, it is the car which is a lemon. The PRI is not the party of the majority but of the imposition. While it retains control of the state and its party is in charge of the electoral processes and mechanisms, there will not be democracy in Mexico.[32]

The January 1994 Zapatista uprising made the bishop's statements on the need for conversion seem more prescient. In his Lenten message that year the bishop puts it this way:

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[30]Iribarren, 22.

[31]Samuel Ruiz García, Entrevista de prensa tomado de: El boletín informativo de Pueblo (marzo 1978), 7.

[32]Romero, 14.

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> In the face of the violence of the "established order" the church cannot remain permanently quiet under penalty of ratifying with its silence the sin of the world. With the energy the spirit of the Prophets has given us and with the force of the Gospel, we require, with or without success, the conversion of people and social structures.[33]

But if the established order is to be reshaped, the conversion of the rich and powerful is essential. Ruiz accepts that without this critical action, change is not possible. He notes the biblical promise, that this conversion is possible, found in stories like that of Zacchaeus:[34]

> This is the hour of conversion. It is a moment of grace. This is a call of conscience. It is not possible to construct a durable peace, if we are not disposed to recognize the transformations necessary in this order. . . . Who else has to be disposed to contribute more, in the end to make justice to those who least have it? This is the attitude of Zacchaeus which we must instill in our hearts, those of us who possess some political or economic power.[35]

In another homily delivered during this same period, Ruiz is again talking to those who create or at least are complicit with a system of social structures he believes are unjust. Reflecting on the Bible passage about the lepers,[36] Ruiz observes:

> . . . we also have considered people as lepers, but the sickness is one we give them. There is a myth in the Mayan zone, where the "Aschamen," the thrower of sickness, is spoken of, which assumes that there is someone who can induce sickness in another by sending or revenge. And on one occasion [an indigenous man from Huixtan] said, "I know Señor Bishop, I know where all our sickness comes from: there is a big Aschamen, who throws the sickness, and this is called the society in which we live." He did not have a word to say unjust social structure, but that is what he was saying. This is the origin of our sicknesses. . . . We are talking of twenty years of events and we see how the thrower of sickness is working and we see the stains of the leper we induced in

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[33]Samuel Ruiz García, "Sistematizacion de los documentos del tatik Samuel, escritos del 31 de diciembre de 1993 a abril de 1994," compiled by Francisco Arguelles (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, Spring 1994), 10, photocopied. Lent is the forty-day preparation period prior to Easter.

[34]See Luke 19:1-10.

[35]Ruiz, "Sistematizacion," 8.

[36]See Luke 5:12-16.

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> extensive social groups. The stain of economic marginalization, the stain of cultural marginalization, the stain of political marginalization--[the indigenous] were thrown out of the community, and have to yell in their language, with their particular attire when they go through the streets: "I am Indian, I am Indian," it is to say, I am a leper, I have been thrown out of the community. But what is the medicine with which they are furnished? Only the precaution of keeping their poverty and marginalization from being contagious. . . .[37]

Ruiz is pointing out that Mexican society's mistreatment of the indigenous people has, in the events of the Zapatista uprising, revealed itself as a grave error. Thus he asserts, a "re-established order" must create a space for those who have not been included. This is the way to convert the church and society. Ruiz explains:

> This is the largest social sin, for which all of us must ask forgiveness. It is a historical error, which now those lifting up arms throw in our face and we have to receive without haggling. We cannot continue constructing the Mexico of the future over the tomb of the indigenous people . . . the most ancient race of our national identity and without giving the true descendants of the first creators of our country the place of dignity which their position demands . . . the facts of Chiapas also show the degree of generalized discontent in civil society, not only by these forgotten ones, but because of the [national] project being constructed. For the critical conscience of civil society, in the project, not only is there no space for the indigenous but neither is there space for large sectors of the poor or for the workers of the campo and the city.[38]

Ruiz is arguing that a church which accepts the preferential option for the poor is called to pursue individual and societal conversion, which means a reordering of society. The poor are at the center of the church; they offer the path to redemption. If one wants to be Christian and receive redemption, then encounters with marginalization and poverty are essential. Ruiz puts it this way:

> The Christian religion disconcertingly put the socially marginalized, the exploited, in the center of the human and religious life. Not only is the dispossessed the parameter which must regulate social and religious life, but God himself is defined as the God of the poor, and Jesus the Son of

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[37]Ruiz, "Sistematizacion," 6.
[38]Ibid., 41.

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> God incarnate (the only one who could do it), chose marginalization and poverty as the route to redemption.[39]

He grounds this belief in his understanding of liberation theology and the teachings of Jesus: "I cannot be saved except in relation to the poor; this is the theological position which we would call a reflection of the theology of liberation, which is no more than a return to that which Jesus was saying. . . ."[40] But personal and societal conversion are, for Ruiz, intimately linked: "The support of the poor is the only potential for change. The poor must transform the church, the state and all of society. Look, I see all this as if it were a soccer team: At first we are losing, but then we are going to win. We have to win!"[41] But there is a dilemma here: on the one hand Ruiz is advocating structural change, a reordering of society and on the other he says that the only way to redemption is through encounters with the poor (who would not exist in a reordered society). The tension produced by this paradox continues to animate debate within the church regarding its relations to a redeemable, but as yet unredeemed, world.

In sum, Ruiz contends that poverty and suffering are incompatible with the will of God. The social, political and economic problems of the diocese persist because, particularly among the rich, the conversion process is incomplete, but encounters with poverty and suffering may lead to conversion.

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[39]Ruiz, "El conflicto de la religión," 27.
[40]Mejias, 12.
[41]Romero, 17.

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3. Change in society is possible through the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Central to the theological rationale of the diocese is the hope of resurrection. During the May 1993 gathering of Pueblo Creyente (people who believe), the organization of religious laity in the diocese, a *campesino* said this about the Resurrection:

> We have severe and painful problems. . . . But when we communicate our suffering and shame, then we hear the Word of God and we feel the suffering of Christ is living in us and that his *Viacrucis* lives today in our municipios. It would seem we are never going to finish this ordeal (Calvary), nor will our problems end. . . . It seems that we are not going to have resurrection. . . . But if Jesus spent three days in the ground, we do not know how much time we are going to have our problems. . . . But we are sure that we are going to be resurrected.[42]

Belief in the Resurrection--the notion that Jesus, who was crucified, rose from the dead after three days in the tomb, walked again among his followers and then ascended into Heaven to be with God who is his father--is a source of hope for Christian believers. It is an illogical, irrational event which opens up the possibility that insurmountable odds may be overcome. In the Diocese of San Cristóbal the promise of resurrection, new life for individuals and for society, is interpreted in very concrete terms. It is understood as a promise that social, political and economic, as well as personal, hardships can be conquered. Buoyed by their faith in the power of the Resurrection, members of Pueblo Creyente also spent considerable time at that gathering discussing human rights, the creation of a unified campesino organization, coffee prices, political education courses and women's rights.

Citing the text of Romans 8:18-27, Ruiz describes the difficulty of finding hope in the midst of injustice.[43] He talks about the way the Holy Spirit intercedes and the

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[42]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 9. For a more complete description of Pueblo Creyente see Chapter Six.

[43]"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the

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strength derived from belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ: "The process of the Diocesan Church built over thirty-three years, has at its source the Resurrection of Christ: because if Christ did not rise, our pastoral work is in vain, and your faith is in vain. This message of the Resurrection becomes the center which, behind the various steps, gives us hope, because the Resurrection is the central mystery of faith and our faith has inspired all that we have done."[44] According to Ruiz, belief in the Resurrection has been *the* guiding theological principle of the diocese since his arrival; he is convinced all diocesan actions and initiatives are hollow if they are not grounded in belief in this remarkable event. These assertions raise questions regarding the nature of the Resurrection and the type of action acceptance of this belief inspires.

In his 1993 Easter message and in his 1994 Lenten message, Ruiz distinguishes between the historical Resurrection and the final resurrection. The latter is an allusion to the second coming of Christ and the final judgment of God, an event Christians prepare for by engaging in the pursuit of the former, the historical Resurrection. Ruiz explains:

> This is what Christians understand by the experience of Easter, that is to say, to pass, as persons, as a people, from death to life, to put ourselves physically on the path toward historical Resurrection. "The Resurrection of Christ," we said a year ago, "reaffirms our hope in a resurrection of man in history, resurrection which is prior, and guides us, to the final resurrection. In this, humanity is always invited to a reconciliation of groups and social classes and to establish the natural order--violated, submerged and distorted . . . in recognition of human rights and the re-establishment of a human community whose structures function for man and not for accumulation." But these longings of resurrection, which all

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freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for the adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Romans 8:18-27, New Revised Standard Version.

[44]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 21.

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> people share, will not be realized historically, if we are not committed to working seriously to make them a reality. That which carries them through necessarily is the acceptance of the way of the cross.[45]

In this passage in addition to making explicit the distinction between the final and the historical resurrection, Ruiz also addresses three critical questions. First, who is being resurrected? Individuals experience resurrection personally and communities experience it collectively. Second, what are the social, political and economic ramifications of resurrection? The reality of the Resurrection, according to Ruiz, issues an invitation to humanity to return to the "natural order" which serves people rather than profit. Finally, how does this process work? Ruiz maintains that all people want what the Resurrection promises but the only way to secure these things is for people to "work seriously to make them a reality." He describes this as "acceptance of the way of the cross" by which he means working as Jesus worked.

The acceptance of the way of the cross and the invitation to work seriously to return the world to its natural order took on new meaning after the 1994 Zapatista uprising. The church was accused of inciting the uprising and although the EZLN and the church both denied this accusation, statements like this one found in Ruiz's Easter greeting a few months after the uprising certainly give one pause:

> All of us experience the life of being called to participate in the construction of our own history, being active subjects, not only spectators watching it. We feel the walk toward a new Mexico with a new political, social and economic structure, with the collaboration of all people.[46]

Though these words angered and even threatened those who benefited from the political, social and economic structure, they were greeted with enthusiasm by those who were dissatisfied with it.

[45]Ruiz, "Sistematizacion," 36.
[46]Ibid., 3.

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In the same greeting, Ruiz describes the way in which the events of January and February 1994 precipitated changes in Mexico which contributed to the historical resurrection of society:

> Without closing our eyes to the terrible and unacceptable events which put our country into mourning, we have recognized, on the other hand, that our country is changing for the better. Who can deny that our indigenous brothers are returning to enter the grand door of the house of our history, as inhabitants in their own right? They have taken grand steps in the appraisal of their languages and traditions, and in a healing assessment of their culture as something which, rather than diminishing them, lifts them up and enriches the coexistence of the entire nation. Many Christians have opened their consciousness to the existence of these ethnic groups, those of whom they were ignorant and unappreciative. We are on a good path away from a cunning or evident racism. In this way it is understood that for many this is a Mexico distinct from that of the past December.[47]

Thus society mourns the violence and death which accompanied the uprising but the hope of resurrection Ruiz finds in this event is that out of death comes new life--a new appreciation of indigenous people and a new path for Mexico. Ruiz explains that only by embracing and respecting culture can the church itself be resurrected from a past ridden with ignorance and disdain:

> . . . evangelism starts from cultural values from which can be announced more explicitly a God which is present now, acting in the midst of [the indigenous people], but who still may be unknown in the more explicit form of the Father who sent his son to be sacrificed for us and who gathers us in unity in the sending of his spirit. Therefore the goal [of evangelism] is to make an incarnate church rise, not to destroy culture, but to stamp a dynamism on those cultural values, to walk in a liberating process within these cultural patterns.[48]

Ruiz is acknowledging the church's failure; the church has in the past systematically "destroyed culture." However, he is drawing on the hope of the Resurrection as a promise that the church can change. Toward this end he is searching for a way to use

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[47]Ibid.

[48]Ruiz, Entrevista, 3.

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cultural values as a starting point for evangelism. It is not enough to use the promise of the Resurrection to fortify demands for dramatic changes in society; the church must also change itself. Ruiz describes it this way:

> There will not be resurrection in our history if we do not commit ourselves seriously to renouncing sin and the very concrete corrupting manner of power, definitely abandoning attitudes of discrimination, contempt, manipulation and exploitation of our indigenous brothers. Peace will not be possible if we do not take on the demands of justice in relation to the poor. Like civil society, the church has many errors to be corrected and many new commitments to take on. . . .[49]

Thus historical resurrection, as Bishop Ruiz interprets it, is a process which involves individuals and society. It is a process in which the church itself must be engaged. It places the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in an adversarial position to those in power when it demands the re-establishment of society.

Speaking to a national gathering of Citizens for Democracy in 1992, Ruiz carries this argument even farther. He asserts that God is revealed in history by the powerless, not the powerful, advocating a radical reordering of society. The powerful must be brought down and the powerless lifted up, creating a "fraternal community." This, Ruiz maintains, is the "ideal of democracy." This ideal, though beyond reach, must be pursued. The construction of the democratic ideal, he continues, is only achieved through personal transformation:

> . . . but in this Mary discovers the way of actualizing God in history, grand transformations will not be carried out through the efforts of the powerful but through the efforts of the humble and simple and for this the powerful have to descend the throne and elevate the humble and simple, to construct a fraternal community, a community where each one represents God for us and the love of his brother is truly the love of God. This ideal of democracy is not obtainable in perfection in the world, but is an ideal which, throughout history, must continue achieving distinct forms in society. We aspire toward the concrete, with specific historical conditions, but also toward a special presence of the

[49]Ruiz, "Sistematizacion," 11.

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> Señor. He calls us strongly to look with care; that which we want to construct will be constructed through our own transformation.[50]

Here Ruiz is identifying the uniquely prophetic role of the church. As distinct from a political party or peasant organization, the church is transcendent. It operates in this world but it is not fully of this world. Therefore part of its missional task is to prophesize, to articulate what might be and compel its followers to strive for the realization of its vision.[51]

Almost fifteen years earlier, in 1978, Ruiz had recognized the importance of electoral democracy. Journalist José Luis Mejias notes, that reacting to widespread electoral fraud:

> The bishop questions "the exasperating bureaucratic machinery" and condemns "the injustices which could have resolved themselves. Now the people have arrived at their limit of exasperation because it threatens their subsistence" and he asks why if we call ourselves a "democratic government" do we not recognize situations where authentic popular participation rejects the official candidates. . . .[52]

Ruiz condones the concept of electoral democracy but challenges the presumption that such a system existed in Mexico. He was calling, and continues to call for, free and fair elections. An electoral democracy, he maintains, can be secured through a slow transformation. He asserts, "To live, as such, a democracy has to make itself through a gradual, individual and communitarian transformation; this makes it true. And the fruit makes it possible to demonstrate that which is good and bad of that enterprise which we have in our hands."[53] This notion of a process of gradual transformation toward democracy is similar to the long slow process in which the

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[50]Samuel Ruiz García, "'Palabras de nuestro obispo' pronunciadas el domingo 1 de marzo a propósito del II Encuentro Nacional de de Ciudadanos por la Democracia," *Encuentros* 7 (marzo-abril 1992): 39.

[51]See Chapters One and Seven for more discussion of the implications of the church's tendency to shape social, political and economic questions differently than its secular counterparts.

[52]Mejias, 12.

[53]Ruiz, "Palabras de nuestro obispo," 40. Also see the discussion of building democratic life in Chapter One.

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diocese is engaged with the catequistas, leading one to speculate if Ruiz is referring, at least in part, to these lay leaders.

The power of the concept and experience of the Resurrection profoundly impacts all that is happening in the diocese. Having something as intangible as the Resurrection at the core of the work is certainly problematic for a political scientist; but faith in the Resurrection has inspired the church for two thousand years. It is powerful precisely because it is not rational.

4. The church is a catalyst for the construction of the Kingdom of God.

The experience of the Resurrection gives people hope that the world will not continue as it is, that change is possible, that God's Kingdom is coming. Ruiz explains the relationship between the church and the Kingdom of God in this way:

> . . . we know that the church is not the end in and of itself, nor constructed for itself, but is sent to the world as a servant of the world, as a humble but necessary catalyst for the construction of the Kingdom of God which is justice, love and peace; likewise we know that the Kingdom begins here, even though its end is not in this world.[54]

Ruiz does not discuss the institutional components of the church--the organizational structure and material resources. Instead he emphasizes that the church is a servant of the world. Ruiz defines the Kingdom of God as "justice, love and peace." The church, Ruiz asserts, is created to act as a catalyst in the construction of the Kingdom of God--a unique process which begins in this world but is finally completed in another realm. The church uses its theological and material resources to precipitate the world's transformation into a place more in keeping with the church's vision.

[54]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 25.

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In an essay entitled "Salvation and Liberation," published in 1975, Ruiz claims that the purpose of the church is simply "to save the world." Salvation for the world means the realization of the Kingdom of God.

> The church has a reason for being which is to *save the world*. This comes from a conception where the church, which takes in the world, has the responsibility for its salvation. . . . In all cases the church feels the responsibility of carrying the world, which follows a history which is not salvific, to salvation.[55]

He is arguing that the church is somehow distinct from the world, but intimately related to the world. The church has the obligation to rectify ultimately the wrongs of the world. In other words, the world is following a trajectory which does not lead to redemption; the church has a mandate to intervene and help rechart the course.

What is the nature of this recharted course? First and foremost the course, which Ruiz discusses, is explicitly a socio-political, economic course. He never abandons the spiritual realm but neither has he ever conceived of his work in the diocese as restricted to or confined by narrowly defined spiritual matters. Does the course necessarily favor one political/economic system more than another? Ruiz asserted in 1978 that it did not:

> The Kingdom of God is not identified with a particular system; the church can and must subsist in all types of systems--[if it were] a communist system, a socialist system, a capitalist system--but in all the systems it has to be a permanent critic.[56]

In other words, the particular political/economic system is not important as long as the church continues to stand outside that system, holding the vision of the Kingdom of God before the world in such a way as to propel the world closer to the Kingdom. Ruiz continues:

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[55]Samuel Ruiz García, "Salvación y liberación," *Estudios Indígenas CENAMI Cuadernos Trimestrales* V núm. 1 (septiembre 1975): 4.

[56]Mejias, 12.

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> The Christian is the eternal nonconformist, established where exploitation exists; he has to denounce all exploitation in whichever type of society, even inside his own church. Therefore, this is how we understand our work: we do not identify with the system.[57]

Since no system is without fault, the Christian has an endless task of denouncing exploitation wherever it is, even within the church. The church is not exempt from the believer's denunciations.

In 1978 the representative assembly of the diocese undertook a process of self-evaluation. Church leaders were looking "for a way to make the pastoral agents conscious of their own position of class and of their closeness to or distance from the interests of the people."[58] This effort illustrates a reactive tendency within the church to define itself in response to the "interests of the people." The people's interests (a term used by the assembly to refer to those at the base) however, are always compilations of needs and desires from myriad of sources. At times these interests are shaped by the pastoral agents themselves, making the use of "the interests of the people" a problematic benchmark for defining the church.

At this same assembly, various structuralist and functionalist theories of understanding reality were discussed. This was done in order to highlight, in Pablo Iribarren's words:

> . . . the structural role that the diocese plays in the service of the system, independent of the willing "kindness" of its members, and the many ways the church justifies and supports mechanisms of exploitation and the interests of the dominant classes.[59]

According to Iribarren, the ideological-political role which the church plays in society was an important discovery to some of those in attendance at the assembly. The church began to admit that even though the individuals who comprised it were "kind," the institution was in collusion with the exploitative system and the interests of the

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[57]Ibid., 12.
[58]Iribarren, 17.
[59]Ibid.

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dominant classes. At least part of the definition of the church, therefore, must include its role as an exploitative institution. Thus, the church's role as catalyst in the construction of the Kingdom of God includes reconstruction of the church itself. The Kingdom of God, like the concepts of conversion and historical Resurrection discussed earlier, is never fully realized because, as Ruiz explains, egotism, the original sin, will never be fully eradicated:

> If changing society demands a change of structures, the church has to take into account that a political dimension is inevitable. This is a clear consequence. . . . but the Kingdom of God does not identify itself with any of the historical deliberations which stay far from the Kingdom, because egotism (the original sin) forms part of our human structure . . . even though we pass to a new society, there will be egotism there, and the poor will be with us always demanding that the church be the church of the poor, which walks toward the construction of a new community through them. For this, the Christians must be permanent, perpetual critics of all exploitation which exists in whatever type of society.[60]

Here Ruiz acknowledges that politics will play a role if the church is discussing changing structures. He reiterates the claim that Christians are to act as "perpetual critics" of all political structures. Regardless of the changes society undergoes, Ruiz explains, the original sin of egotism will never be eradicated. Therefore the poor will continue to call the church to build a new community with them. Thus, the role of the Christian *within* history is to criticize and work to overcome exploitation. The difficulty with this analytical construct is that it also calls Christians to a task which by definition cannot be successfully completed. Egotism, the original sin which is responsible for the existence of poverty, cannot be eradicated from the human structure. Most political scientists are wont to extol the importance of achievable goals in maintaining organizational membership and participation. Yet for thousands of years the church has existed with quite the opposite philosophy. The faith of its

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[60]Ruiz, "Marco teológico," 30.

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constituents is the element which distinguishes the church from other organizations and is the key to its ability to coalesce people to strive for a seemingly unattainable goal.

The presence of faith enables the church to act as a catalyst for the construction of the Kingdom of God. In 1984, during a process of "ecclesial clarification," members of the representative assembly agreed on the following statement:

> Our ecclesial identity:
> --As a diocesan church we want a complete synthesis, between faith and commitment to justice, which guides all our actions, which must be Good News for the poor and oppressed, and which sustains, supports and inspires the liberating process.
> --Together with the people, we want to celebrate, with joy and deep praise, events, agreements and commitments in a new liturgy which dynamizes those liberating [germs] of popular religiosity.[61]

The assembly proclaimed its allegiance to the church as a place where faith is integrated with a commitment to justice and Good News for the poor and oppressed. The church, accordingly, *inspires* the liberating process. Understood in this way the church is proactive, inspiring the liberating process. The question "liberation from what?" is not directly addressed although the references to the poor and the oppressed imply a commitment to ridding the world of the injustices of poverty and oppression.

Faith carries with it, the bishop explains in a September 1993 interview, the responsibility of all believers to act:

> . . . it is necessary to remember that the church is not the *curia*, the bishop or the pontiff; the church is you, all of us. The function of the church is to foment unity. It is a kind of umbrella. The church defines your posture before life. And it is not only a gift, it is also an effort. . . . The church looks for a new society, a unity including those non-Christians; it requests a life of caring and not of egotism of today's society. The alternative proposed is this: [the Kingdom will] not be realized without the good of all. I am only happy if all are made happy.

[61]Iribarren, 44.

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> The only question asked us in the moment of final judgment will be:
> When I was hungry, did you give me something to eat?[62]

Ruiz's description of the church remains consistent. On the one hand the people are the church but on the other, the church "defines your posture before life." That is, the church provides the foundation or the starting point from which all of life is lived. The church, he surmises, is greater than the sum of its parts; to be a part of the church is a gift from God but also requires action. The people who comprise the church search for new ways of ordering society. Each person must be content, the bishop believes, and moreover each person must be fed, in order for anyone to be happy or full.

In the end the church is called to be a catalyst in the construction of the Kingdom of God: the church is called to "save the world." Following the Zapatista uprising, this task was addressed by the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas with renewed urgency. In a homily a few weeks after the violence had subsided, Ruiz preached to a full cathedral. He told the worshippers a new Mexico, the result of the saving actions of God, could be brought about by the efforts of all people preaching the Word of God:

> Like this then, we are all called to preach, to announce the word of the Señor, our task is to construct a new Mexico which we obtain as a result of this salvific action which the Señor wants to give to us. . . .[63]

5. The church is called to accompany the poor in their religious and political struggle.

> Becoming acquainted with the painful reality of our brothers, the poorest of the poor, we chose to accompany them, like the good Samaritan, in their search for a new society, structured on justice and fraternity.[64]

It was responding to, or accompanying, the people which helped the church to determine a course of action; just as happened in the biblical parable of the Samaritan

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[62]Romero, 15.
[63]Ruiz, "Sistematizacion," 9.
[64]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 27.

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who stops to help a man who was beaten and left for dead by robbers.[65] The church has been present in the communities of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas for a very long time. It has a unique staying power. While other groups have come and gone, the church has remained, and in all likelihood will remain. Profoundly affected by those to whom it was ministering, the church has reshaped its ministry. According to Ruiz, the church chose to accompany the poorest of the poor who were already moving when the church joined them. Thus Ruiz has defined accompaniment as the church's response to the poor as they search for a more just society. Accompaniment understood in this way involves the church playing an active role in the community. The boundaries and limitations of this role will be discussed in more detail below.

In a sermon preached in 1979 on the occasion of the ordination of Javier Reyes and Francisco Santiago, Bishop Ruiz describes a different aspect of accompaniment, one in which the church is simply present in the community. He tells the story of how these two individuals went to live in a village for two years simply to be with, and learn about, the people:

> They did not come to organize the catechism, they did not come to organize meetings; they came to accompany the people in their historic path. And this is a good thing. They wanted to be together with the communities, to feel a part of them, to understand their problems and to be able in this way to be of service in relation to the historic path of the communities in the future. They did not try to bring in from the outside that which they could give: the Word of God; this Word of God must be a response to the problems and the path of the community.[66]

Here Ruiz is laying out a stage of accompaniment which precedes the "good Samaritan" stage. It does not include offering religious instruction or community activities, but consists only of being with and getting to know the people. Only once a significant amount of time has been given up to this task can the religious leaders "be of service"

[65]Luke 10:25-37.

[66]Samuel Ruiz García, "Homilía pronunciada en La Independencia, durante la ordenación diaconal de F. Javier Reyes and Francisco J. Santiago," *Caminante* 22 (agosto 1979): 2.

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to the community. This is because, according to Ruiz, the Word of God, which was all the religious leaders had to offer, cannot be brought in or imposed but rather must be a response to the community itself.

But the notion that the Word of God was the only thing the religious leaders had to offer is naive. These two outsiders moving into a small community come with at least some money, a great deal of education, interaction with and access to the outside world. These are resources which are inevitably shared and thus affect the community.

The assertion that the Word of God is inserted into the equation solely as a response to the needs of the community, or the impression that the Word of God is malleable, molded by the particular needs of the community, raises perhaps the most difficult aspect of the notion of accompaniment: leadership. Who is setting the agenda? Who is following it? Ruiz points to a campesino's observation that governmental "authorities do not like it that we organize ourselves and [they] want to get rid of the persons that are at the head of the group."[67] This campesino is asserting that indigenous people (not religious leaders) are behind the organizational efforts in their communities and that the government is not in favor of such activity. The government's disapproval is not surprising; most indigenous organizations coalesce around their opposition to various government policies. The assertion that the indigenous people are organizing themselves bears scrutiny. Is the claim that the church accompanies the people by simply being present ever a valid description of the church's work in the community? Or is the good Samaritan model where the church actively works on behalf of the poor and exploited, more accurate? What is the nature of religious accompaniment? How does the church's presence in the communities impact the organizing initiatives of the indigenous people? What does religious accompaniment, as a tool of the church, have to do with politics?

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[67]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 10.

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The church provides one of the few vital links between isolated communities in the diocese and the social, political and economic realities of the larger world. Given that in this diocese, the church has tended to champion a radical alternative to the existing socio-political scenario, religious accompaniment has potentially profound political ramifications. The diocesan assembly of January 1980 examined the work of the different equipos. The theme encouraged the assembly to focus on "the accompaniment of the people in their significant actions, like the incipient organization of the people in the presence of an increasingly stronger unjust capitalist system." Those at the assembly agreed:

> These acts require accompaniment on the part of the church, which takes clear positions and illuminates them with faith. The people are organizing, becoming conscious and mobilizing themselves. It is necessary to question our actions in light of these actions; is our response the same?[68]

The assembly asserts that the people are organizing themselves to address the issues raised by an increasingly stronger "unjust capitalist system." The assembly also agreed that the church must find a way to respond to the people's efforts. The notion that the work of the church may have precipitated some of this organizing is not addressed.

Ruiz's 1993 pastoral letter describes four steps of the current diocesan process: pastoral renewal; pastoral reappraisal; grasping or harnessing the socio-political dimension; and understanding the economic and social processes of neoliberal modernity. In the third step, harnessing the socio-political dimension, Ruiz describes the necessity of diocesan accompaniment as the indigenous people attempt to recover their land, and the negative reactions received by those indigenous leaders and pastoral workers who were involved in this process:

> This step frames the inevitable commitment of our diocesan accompaniment of the indigenous struggles for the recovery of their lands . . . brought tensions and conflicts, caused us a campaign of

[68]Iribarren, 24.

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> discredit, implicating the indigenous leaders and pastoral agents who accompany them. . . .[69]

In this sense, accompaniment is an undeniably political act.

In that same year journalist César Romero, acknowledging the political nature of the work of the church, asked Bishop Ruiz if that meant the church was linked to the PRD. "Listen Don Samuel," Romero observed, "I see some of your theses coincide with the basic theses of the Left--like the lack of credibility of the regime, the lack of democracy--especially with the ideas of the PRD. . . ." Bishop Ruiz responded:

> I am with the people who walk, I am with the gospel. More than that, it is not important to me which side it is. I do not accept caricatures of the Right or the Left; this is not for us Christians. And if you want to see radicalism in what I say, then it is the radicalism of the poor. I think that power has to be service; if not, it is domination. . . . As Jesus did, I reach out for the poor, even though this signifies throwing myself into an abyss.[70]

In the 1985 diocesan assembly, "accompaniment of the people" was the primary topic of discussion. The assembly described the ways in which they keep the process of accompaniment alive:

1. They help to create a critical conscience.
2. They do not replace the people in actions which they must do themselves: the people are the subject of their history.
3. They support the community, not only isolated persons.
4. They promote the participation of the woman.
5. They search for justice for the implantation of the Kingdom.
6. They are a unifying link between independent organizations.[71]

A church which remains committed to these six elements is, according to the assembly, accepting its call to accompany the poor in their religious and political struggle. The assembly also examined the ways accompaniment has helped the people in the economic, political and ideological arenas:

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[69]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 24.
[70]Romero, 17.
[71]Iribarren, 52.

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> In the economic: Some initiatives were suggested--production cooperatives, transport, workshops, collective production works, technical assistance, loans, support courses, etc.
>
> In the political: Support of land claims. Political formation: Courses, assemblies; legal assistance to initiatives animating reflection and conscientization of rights and obligations; critical support for organized groups, including regional organizations of catequistas, refugees, political prisoners, invaders and the displaced; denunciation of repression and acts of conflict before the public; the creation of a union of ejidos, participation in marches, meetings and demonstrations.
>
> In the ideological: Accompanying groups with theological and biblical reflection; celebrating the triumphs and the failures in the struggles for land through liturgy; unfreezing a traditional religious numbness, orientation for the integration of faith and life, etc.; creating a critical conscience and equality; informing about the positions of the protestant sects, etc.[72]

Here accompaniment is more than simply being present in the community. Those religious leaders who are accompanying the communities have adopted a highly influential, politicized role. Finally this assembly laid out nine challenges which were facing the church in this regard. The issues of land, human rights and popular organizations were raised a number of times and in the end there was a clear statement about the centrality of faith in all these struggles. The assembly agreed:

> 1. To create a diocesan organization dealing with land with the following functions: legal assistance; channel of denunciations; defense of human rights.
> 2. [To underscore the] theological significance of land and evangelical illumination of the struggles for land.
> 3. To elaborate the Diocesan Plan with the objective of unity of associations, explain and prioritize the criteria of accompaniment of the people, guide their actions toward the popular organization, through the reflection of faith, promoting ministries and autoctonous vocations. . . .
> 5. To clarify the opening between faith and politics in order to determine the church's action in the face of the most grave conflicts; to clarify the popular project; to reinforce the analysis of the people; to make themselves present in the different struggles of the people,

[72]Ibid., 51-52.

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> sharing the risks; to create relationships among the base including political formation. . . .[73]

This theme of accompaniment was adopted in the wake of a very turbulent discussion raised at the assembly the year before. There had been lengthy discussion about the shortcomings of the organizational model of the diocese, particularly what was perceived by some as a vacuum of authority.[74] The concern was twofold. First, the growing strength of the catechetical ministry led to a decentralized church, leaving some to question who was actually in charge. Second, the diocese talked of deriving its authority from the people or "the poor"; yet the people as such were not represented at the assemblies. Iribarren explains:

> Some of the pastoral agents were worried about the absence of the base (ministries or representatives of the indigenous campesino base) in the assembly; or the lack of mechanisms which encourage the participation of the base in the decisions which affect them. The great absence in the diocesan assemblies is the people.[75]

This criticism called into question the very essence or validity of the work of the diocese, since the diocese derives much of its authority, at this point, from its accompaniment of the people. The leadership responded that:

1. The voice of the people arrives at the assembly by way of the pastoral agents.
2. It is not possible to engage the people in interminable meetings with language, dynamics and formats foreign to their cultural modes.
3. The political management of analysis as an instrument of social transformation is not assumed as an orthodox way for the people. . .
4. The people really participate in the corresponding meetings of communitarian assemblies and the catequista structure which are directly related to the equipo zones.[76]

So essentially the diocesan leadership claimed that pastoral agents who live and accompany the people in the communities are to serve as the voice of the people in the

[73] Ibid., 53.
[74] Ibid., 45.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 46.

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assembly. The people cannot participate in long, drawn-out meetings of the church because language and cultural barriers will not permit it. The true participation of the people happens during regional assemblies and in conjunction with the catequista program. Iribarren notes that this discussion left all the participants feeling unsettled. It is worthy of note that, in 1991, the laity formed its own assembly, Pueblo Creyente.[77]

Despite their absence in the assemblies, the presence of the catequistas added an important layer to the notion of accompaniment. The hierarchy was being led to redefine its ideas as it reflected on what those at the base considered to be ministry. The catequistas emerged as pivotal leaders--agenda shapers--of the diocese. So, in a sense, while the catequistas were accompanying their communities, and being accompanied by pastoral workers, the catequistas were themselves accompanying the religious leaders on their journey to build a ministry which responds to the religious and political struggles of the poor.

The question of how directive the process of religious accompaniment should be remains ambiguous. In a statement following the January 1994 uprising, Ruiz again raises the image of the Samaritan and advocates a strong mandate emerging from Vatican II and Medellín for the church to accept responsibility for solving the problems of the poor. He declares:

> The Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops meeting in Medellín committed the church to lay the groundwork for its pastoral work, not let the church be guided by a passive resignation and slight Christianity, but to commit itself to that which *would look for effective concrete solutions for the grave problems of the people*, as Jesus did in his time. Following his teaching, we decide not to pass at the side of the wounded in the road but *to take responsibility for him, help him get on his feet and denounce that which caused his suffering as a tragedy which should not continue*. We would want PEACE WITH JUSTICE. In our pastoral work we have continued confronting situations which maintain a

[77]See Chapter Six for more details on this assembly.

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> crucified people, killed for causes which could be overcome in a just and fraternal social organization which makes it possible for the poor to be subjects of a dignified history and to be children of God.[78]

But later, in the same statement, Ruiz points out one of the critical limits of accompaniment. The church will not condone violence. If that is what emerges from the community, the church will continue to work with the community, but it will not participate in this activity. Ruiz continues:

> We understand the subjective situation of many of our brothers that have opted for a path that we consider wrong. The cry of anguish of those who give up their lives in search of better conditions deserves all our understanding, if not for them, at least for their children. As a diocese we declare that violence obstructs the path of true solutions, and from this rejection of violence, we want to accompany the people and their social organizations to defend their rights and better the true conditions of their lives. Within the strict [mark] of our pastoral action and the prophetic demands of announcing and denouncing, our labor will continue to be that of supporting the weakest and most vulnerable, whose lives are most fragile because of the situation.[79]

Of course critics of the church wonder how the church works with people who adopt violent means without supporting and encouraging this activity, even implicitly.

* * *

The theological rationale which guides the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas--poverty and suffering are not consonant with the will of God; the experience of poverty and suffering may lead to conversion; change in society is possible through the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ; the church is a catalyst for the construction of the Kingdom of God; and the church is called to accompany the poor in their religious and political struggle--has encouraged the church to engage in pastoral activity

[78]Ruiz, "Sistematizacion," 55.
[79]Ibid.

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which has had political consequences. In the following chapters the ways in which this theology has been converted into politics will be explored.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Catalysts of Democracy: A New Role for the Catequistas

In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas (one of three dioceses which comprise the state of Chiapas), the episcopal leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García and the burgeoning of the catequista program have created a place where politics--the formation of popular organizations, the empowerment of indigenous peoples, the struggles for land redistribution and the quest for democracy--has become intimately entwined with religion.

Throughout the period under consideration (1960-1994), the catequistas served as catalysts of social and political activity in their communities. Their work triggered a dynamic interaction between the religious and political hierarchy and the base, which makes explicit the ideological agenda of a progressive Catholic theology. This chapter will examine the emergence of the catequistas as political as well as religious leaders, reviewing the way in which the catequistas' role has shifted and the conditions which prompted this shift.

The Emergence of the Catequistas

Bishop Samuel Ruiz García arrived in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in 1960, two years prior to the opening of the Second Vatican Council. He attended the Council in Rome and the Medellín bishops' conference, presiding over the diocese when the changes initiated by Vatican II transformed religious teaching and practice within the church. For almost forty years the diocese has been engaged in a process of conscientization--encouraging its constituents to understand and to challenge the social, economic and political reality in which they live. To facilitate this process, Ruiz encouraged the preparation of a sizable group of lay leaders or catequistas.

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Traditionally within the Catholic church catechists oversee religious training and education. In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the catequistas (eighty to ninety percent of whom are indigenous and bilingual in Spanish and Mayan languages) have developed prominent roles as community/political leaders in conjunction with their religious activities. Many are deeply involved in a struggle, which has been going on for generations, to eradicate poverty and landlessness and to construct democracy in Chiapas.

The presence of the catequistas in the diocese has contributed to the effectiveness of the ministry of the Catholic church. The Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas spans 36,821 square kilometers and serves almost one million people. In the early 1960s there were approximately 700 catequistas fulfilling the fairly traditional role of religious educators. By 1985, 6,180 catequistas were at work in the area. And by 1993 their number had grown to almost 8,000 and their work was considered *"el trabajo vertebral"* (the vertebral work or centerpiece) of the diocese.[1] What precipitated this change? What conditions prompted the catequistas in this diocese to transcend the more traditional role of catechists as religious educators?

Catequistas: Transcending the Traditional Role

In 1961 the episcopacy organized a gathering to study evangelism among the indigenous people. As a result of this meeting the diocese agreed to the founding of an *internado* (boarding school) for indigenous catequistas. Bishop Ruiz approached the Marist Brothers about the project:

> We want to install an internado, modest as one would want, but one where the indigenous would learn to live a more human life. We don't want them only to learn the catechism; its influence will be much greater

[1] *Documento de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de Las Casas Chiapas, Mexico* (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, septiembre 1989), 4, photocopied.

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> if a well-studied catechism and a Christian life are united with advanced secular instruction, as time and possibilities permit.[2]

The language of this charge, as Ruiz describes the creation of a place where the indigenous people would "learn to live a more human life," does not yet reflect the growing respect for indigenous culture which would later help define diocesan pastoral work.

On January 6, 1962, the Marists began to make pastoral visits with the bishop in order, in the words of one Brother:

> . . . to saturate ourselves in the indigenous ways, their language, their customs, their way of life. . . . The indigenous have a simple spirit and deep religious sentiments, but are wrapped up in a haze of superstition, of ignorance and of misery, that is going to mark, profoundly, the slow route toward civilization and the Christian religion. . . . [the indigenous] have a somber and sad air because in reality their life is sad. For them life is getting drunk; there is almost no other cause to be happy.[3]

This comment implies that the introduction of Christianity would help move the indigenous people along "the slow route toward civilization," insinuating that these people were heretofore somewhat uncivilized. This assumption is representative of the perspective which characterized the initial stages of the catequista program.

The Marist Brothers spent all of 1962 renovating the building which would house the school, and familiarizing themselves with the area. In February 1963 the catechetical courses began. Thirty to sixty Tzeltals, Tzotzils, Ch'ols and Tojolabals participated in each course which lasted three to four months. The internado was set up like a seminary. Students learned prayers and songs, some of which were translated into Tzeltal. They also had courses in secular subjects such as geography, where they learned, for example, the sun was not necessarily a god. After some rigorous physical exercise every day, the students trained in trades such as carpentry or leather work.[4]

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[2]Jorge Carrasco, "Misioneros evangelizados: 25 años de camino de la misión de Guadalupe," *Caminante* 44 (enero-marzo 1987): 13.

[3]Ibid., 13-14.

[4]Ibid., 15.

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In 1968 a bilingual--Spanish and Tzeltal--book of catechism, entitled *Dios nos ama/Dios yasc'anotic* [God loves us] was created. The hope had been that the catequistas could use the book in their communities. However Javier Vargas, its author, acknowledged that the text was outdated by the time it was available because of issues raised by the documents of Medellín such as the claim that "to create a just social order . . . is an eminently Christian task"; the denunciation of "liberal capitalism" and "the Marxist system" as "militating against the dignity of the human person"; and the notion that man is "an agent of his own history," requiring the Church to adopt the "task of 'conscientization' and social education."[5] That meeting stimulated an intensive process, which continues today, to shape a catechism more reflective and respectful of the indigenous reality. In response the internado worked "to promote the integral/whole/complete development of the indigenous communities of Chiapas." The catechetical training courses were redesigned to acknowledge the resources the indigenous participants had to offer, and embraced a more participatory teaching model:

> . . . now it was not the Marist Brothers who implemented the course, now various pastoral agents got together and tried to achieve the most participation possible. The central axis of the methodology was the reflection of the catequistas about a theme proposed each day by the pastoral agents. The contributions were systematized and converted into a short written piece, that served as the text for literacy in the afternoon. The songs were born of the reflections of the catequistas, with the music created in the moment.[6]

Participants praised the new courses, and the work with the catequistas continued to capture the attention of the diocese. Vargas observes:

> The formation of indigenous catequistas is, without a doubt, the most important part of the church's work. Now the presence of a catequista in a parish signifies a religious authority and his decisions are worth more than any other word. The catequista has become a substitute for

[5]Ibid., 15. Medellín statements quoted in Smith, *Emergence of Liberation*, 162.
[6]Carrasco, "Misioneros," 16.

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> the priest who can only visit the *parroquia* once a year. As such, the formation of the catequista requires a lot of care and must include all the possible aspects of: religion, healing, first aid, civics, agriculture, work, etc., and above all the formation of his character and his willingness to be a true apostle. This is precisely what we have tried to do in our internado for indigenous catequistas; clearly there are still many things to improve.[7]

The ideas emerging from the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín gathering, such as respect for indigenous culture, an expanded role for the laity and a less hierarchical church, were taken very seriously and reflected directly in the work of the diocese. Yet it is important to note that these efforts were building on the legacy of the work of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and the social doctrine of the Catholic church which had been well before the 1960s. Still, in the mid 1960s and early 1970s, the Catholic church was experiencing a rejuvenation. In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas this included examining the church's relationship to the indigenous people. As early as 1965 the Consejo Diocesano de Pastoral was created to study the process of forming an autoctonous church.[8]

At the 1968 Medellín gathering, Bishop Ruiz was named President of Missions of CELAM. He served in that position from 1968 to 1974. His work in this area encouraged the diocese to continue to reflect on the nature of mission work in Latin America, which helped shape how the diocese understood its relationship with the indigenous people living within its boundaries. Also at the Medellín gathering Bishop Ruiz presented a paper describing the evangelization of Latin America. He explained that previous efforts of evangelization had been only partially successful. The conversion, particularly of indigenous people, did not represent a true transformation, but rather their tacit acceptance of religious symbols and rituals in order to placate religious and political authorities.[9] Thus the process of evangelization, which included

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[7]Ibid., 14.

[8]An autoctonous church is one which has its own strengths, abilities and ministries all of which reflect its faith within its own cultural framework.

[9]See Chapter Three for more discussion of the issue of conversion of the indigenous people.

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the ecclesial structures, needed to be revised. Ruiz's commitment to this effort is evidenced by the changes he undertook in his own diocese.

Immediately following the CELAM meeting the diocese was organized into six zones divided by language/culture, each with its own team of priests, secular clergy and religious. Previously diocesan structure had paid little attention to language and cultural boundaries. This new arrangement helped focus the parish toward the community it was designed to serve, and made communication and working together easier. The structure was a practical response to the need to sustain a church that was short on resources, particularly clergy, and was trying to address the needs of an overwhelmingly indigenous population.

The church, although becoming more cognizant of the political, social and economic problems facing its constituents, was considering its institutional needs when it put the zone system in place. Still, the political impact of this decision cannot be ignored. The systematic organization of the people along traditional lines of allegiance enhanced already strong community organizational structures. Also, by holding regular gatherings, the church provided an automatic way to link the people within the zones and to link the zones to each other. So as the church grew more respectful of the integrity of the indigenous communities, the catequistas gained stature in the eyes of their communities and the religious leadership; consequently many catequistas emerged as key political leaders in their communities.

By 1968 hundreds of catequistas had been trained and were working in their communities. The church's perception of and relationship to the indigenous communities had been fundamentally altered. Still, the sentiment expressed by the catequistas during this period captures the direction of additional changes which were needed. The catequistas explained:

> The church and the Word of God have told us things to save our spirits, but we don't know how to save our bodies. During our work for the

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> salvation of our spirit and for the spirits of others, we suffer hunger, sickness, poverty and death.[10]

The bishop and a number of priests of the diocese had recently returned from the bishops' gathering in Medellín where the theological concepts which would lay the foundation for the theology of liberation were widely discussed. The catequistas, echoing the words of a meeting they knew little about, were clearly articulating their desire to save more than spirits. They were asking the diocese to help them to address issues of hunger, sickness, poverty and death.

Training for Change: Two Catechetical Training Efforts

The diocese, as evidenced by Vargas' response to the Medellín documents, was rethinking the manner in which the catequistas were organized and trained. The earlier methods had run somewhat counter to the communitarian traditions of the indigenous people, since the training the catequistas were receiving was "Western" and decidedly hierarchical. Once they completed the course the catequistas had the authority to preside over the community prayer group and the celebration and reflection of the Word of God. Initially the catequistas were identified by parish priests and approved by the bishop. These catequistas--almost all young men since they were most likely to have the skills and mobility necessary to participate in the training courses--often displaced traditional community leaders and upset the community tradition of identifying its leaders or "*cargo* holders" collectively.[11] As the catequistas grew in number and experience and the church hierarchy itself became more conscientized regarding its relationship to the indigenous communities, the diocesan role gradually changed. The community chose who would be trained as catequistas. The catechetical courses were taught at least partially in Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Ch'ol and encouraged more

[10] Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 29.

[11] A cargo is a burden, or responsibility, undertaken on behalf of the community.

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exchanges of ideas. Catequistas were taught to be facilitators of community reflection rather than teachers of a predetermined or prescribed message. There was an effort to embrace rather than replace indigenous culture.

A brief review of two courses for catequistas and interested parishioners, one held in 1979 and the other in 1984 reflect this changing trend.[12] In each there is an emphasis on interaction and community participation. Political content is explicit and partisan. Although the importance of the community is stressed, indigenous identity per se is not mentioned. The second course demonstrates more sophisticated political analysis and activities.

In March 1979 a course was held in Aurora, Panthelό. The five-page handout from the course describes six agreements which provided the framework for the sessions. The first agreement simply notes the acceptance of the group structure in place. The second agreement states:

> The Word of God is not separated from our problems. You know the sign . . . of the sick tree? You know the fruits of the sick tree? These are *caciques*. Lack of roads. Selling coffee cheaply. The business people exploit. The woman is not taken into account. . . . INMECAFE . . .LIQUOR . . . AND OTHERS.[13]

Throughout this course the word of God is directly connected to the problems of the people. A sick tree produces sick fruit. There must be a cure and the cure is found in the word of God. The third agreement continues: "Injustice, as a principle, causes all the hardships."[14] These agreements were arrived at by studying the signs of the times, that is:

> . . . the Sign of buying expensive and selling cheap in the market (beans and corn) and the sign that liquor is expensive and the people exchange

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[12]These are not the courses used to train individuals to become catequistas but rather a kind of renewal or continuing education.

[13]"Curso de catequista celebrado en la Aurora Pantelhó," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 6-14 marzo 1979), 1, photocopied. A cacique is a political boss. INMECAFE is the Mexican Coffee Institute.

[14]Ibid., 3.

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> their [rice] and their beans for liquor. The sign that the tree is sick . . . why? The tree is sick because: We do not know our problems. The government cheats us because we are not organized. There is not agreement among us and among all the communities and authorities to have justice. . . . We have not taken women into account in our agreements. . . .[15]

These issues are described as the signs that "the tree is sick." During the course the participants are called upon to speak out. They are told that the laws of the state may not necessarily reflect God's will or God's law, and therefore, these laws must be changed. As people of God, they cannot be silent.[16] The fourth agreement begins to look at the systemic nature of injustice and how it might be overcome. It says: "*(a)* Violence of the oppressor breeds violence in the oppressed. The violence of the oppressed breeds liberation. *(b)* Therefore, the campesino united can struggle against injustice. *(c)* If in the municipio, the campesinos are the majority, we can transform ourselves into a popular force."[17]

At one point the question is posed, "How do/did we arrive at this principle of agreement?" The response is deceptively simple: "We arrived at it by studying the rich and the poor of our municipio, the rich and the poor of Chiapas and the rich of other countries to whom our government sells our rich products."[18] Little is said about prayer, studying of the Bible, or worship as means of discerning the consensus, although as noted above, various Bible verses did inspire the discussions.

There is a discussion of Panthelò, focusing on the village's production, number of inhabitants, and finally, the problem of distribution of the village resources, which although abundant are exploited by rich people outside of Chiapas. After studying all these issues, the fifth agreement was reached: "The man who struggles for justice is reconstructing the plan of God."[19] The method used in this course was to examine "the

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[15]Ibid., 2.
[16]Two biblical texts, Amos 5, 7:11-12 and Matthew 23:23-32 are used to support these claims.
[17]"Curso de catequistas," 3.
[18]Ibid.
[19]Ibid., 5.

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reality" and then reflect on what God says in the Bible about it. Underlying the course was the assumption that the inequities in the world do not reflect God's plan for the world and the work of the church is an attempt to restore or reconstruct God's plan.

Finally the participants considered the words of Pope John Paul II and tried to answer the question: "How are we, the catequistas and the *prediaconos*, going to work from now on?" They reached a conclusion after thinking for a long time about the text of Mark 11:12-14. Their sixth agreement reflects this conclusion:

> 1. We are going to begin to work *little by little* TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE COMMUNITY.
> 2. We are going to begin to work with the community on the problem of HEALTH.
> 3. In the meetings of the catequistas we will continue working on the agreements which we made in this course.[20]

This course, and others like it, provided catequistas with a very distinct type of religious education. It is not difficult to see how the catequistas transcended the traditional role of religious educators and why many wealthy landholders and business people were threatened by this change.

A course held five years later in 1984, in Pinabetal (near San Cristóbal de Las Casas) addressed an equally broad range of issues. However, it reflects a more sophisticated socio-political analysis and consequently more sophisticated responses to this analysis. The goals and accomplishments of this course approached issues of democratization. The documents referring to this course never mention new church members or the numbers of baptisms or confirmations, instead they focus on issues such as the presence or lack of popular organizations, land distribution and the eradication of alcohol abuse.

This course was given in order to assist a group of catequistas on their "camino historico" (historic journey) in the community of Pinabetal. The land of Pinabetal was,

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[20]Ibid.

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according to the materials prepared for this course, once owned by *finqueros*. The finqueros exhausted the land and sold it to the campesinos, who in turn have divided it, and sold part of it to neighbors. Some of the families "under the leadership of the catequistas . . . have fought to buy some more fertile land in nearby regions in order to liberate themselves from the wasteland. . . ."[21]

There were about fifty catequistas in this area who had been working together for many years. It was a diverse group, including representatives of the various groups within the community, some of whom had been coopted by the official party, others who rejected the party and tried to remain independent and a final group that possessed more land than the others, even though the land was not very productive. Still,

> . . . the reality is that the majority possess very small amounts of land and feel that the Word of God is like a motor which generates in them a struggle to leave slavery. The group with a better social position, which is small, appears ambiguous, surprised and, at times, in opposition to that which they are saying. . . .[22]

The catequistas represented a variety of groups within the community, but the majority, who were poor, often spoke in terms with which the better off minority did not agree.

The people of this community, who had participated in courses on the Gospel of Mark and Luke in the past, had requested a course on the sacraments and the following objective was agreed upon: "to live in a Christian way we participate in the sacraments in the search for the Kingdom of God in order to change our personal, community and social lives, in accordance with the Plan of God which is a plan of love . . . the sacraments urge us toward the liberation of personal and social sin. . . ."[23] The subject of the course was determined by the catequistas. The objective which was articulated by pastoral agents was discussed at length by the catequistas and accepted.

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[21]"La palabra de Dios en la vida del pueblo campesino," *Caminante* 33 (mayo 1984): 54.
[22]Ibid., 55.
[23]Ibid.

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Having done this, the previous year's course was reviewed and an evaluation of how well its agreements had been adhered to was undertaken. One of the agreements had been to eliminate the abuse of alcohol. There was consensus that most communities now recognized its abuse and in some communities alcoholism had disappeared. In others it still existed albeit to a lesser degree.[24]

Then a long list of improvements completed in the communities was rehearsed including:

1. The construction of water tanks in three communities
2. The construction of or improvement of schools in three communities
3. A cooperative action, in which 80 partners bought a three-ton truck
4. The purchase of 92 hectares in a nearby, more fertile zone, in San Jose Buenavista by sixteen families of the community of Pinabetal (the community is trying to buy a piece of land in common for those who do not have sufficient land; in the community of Agua de Leon, ten families are buying seventy-two hectares to be paid for in three years). . . .
5. The community showing solidarity in cases of extreme need, emerging from better participation in the reflection of the Word of God
6. The periodic gathering of a group of women to work for improvements in their communities[25]

Having reviewed the work of the community, the course leaders (advisers and the coordinators--three prediaconos and three catequistas) asked the participants: "Is the Word of God in all the good works of the community?"[26] They received a variety of responses to this inquiry including:

The Word of God is not present in the work of the community: "when we don't share, when we accumulate and we think only of ourselves, when there are offenses and corruption, when we are not organized, when we do not learn and benefit from nothing, when the community doesn't want to work and the people are not united among themselves."

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[24]Ibid.
[25]Ibid., 56.
[26]Ibid.

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The Word of God is in evidence: "when we are together learning in common for the benefit of the community; for example, together we constructed the water tank and we felt relief or comfort (we are going to give drink to the thirsty [see Matthew 25: 40])." "When you do things together for the benefit of all, when there are advances and improvements." "Buying a piece of land when it is to help the most needy people is the Word of God and is good because with this they are going to have a way to live."[27] The responses quickly turned toward the issue of organization: "The people lack patience to organize themselves." "The caciques crush us, we need to know how to organize among ourselves."[28] The concluding documents of this course note that this time of evaluation was more interesting than the discussion of the sacraments because the participants were engaged in a lively exchange.

Those who attended this course were excited about their work in the communities. Their connection to the church had empowered them to work with their communities and the results were tangible. Religious education was the primary cause for gathering, but the by-products of the catequistas' meetings were becoming equally, if not more, significant.

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[27]Ibid., 57.
[28]Ibid., 58.

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Conditions Which Prompted a New Role for the Catequistas

There are at least three conditions which prompted the catequistas to develop a more prominent and political role: the resettlement of campesinos in the Selva Lacandón, the geographic isolation and cultural diversity which characterizes the experience of many Chiapanecas in the diocese, and the presence of a politically progressive bishop and group of priests in the diocese attempting to respond to the dramatic developments in Catholic theology in the wake of Vatican II and the Medellín and Puebla conferences. Together, these conditions provide the threads from which the garments of the political role of the catequistas have been woven.

First Condition: The Resettlement of Campesinos in the Selva Lacandón

In many respects the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s--precisely the time when the catequistas were emerging as an important force--were a period of economic expansion in Chiapas. Cattle ranchers increased their herds from 480,000 head in 1950 to 790,000 head in 1960 to 1.25 million head in 1970. Land under cultivation more than doubled, expanding from 270,000 hectares in 1950 to 750,000 hectares in 1975. And the 1,400 kilometers of roads which existed in 1940 grew to almost 7.5 million kilometers in 1970.[29] Yet, as historian Thomas Benjamin points out, the benefits of this expansion were not uniformly received by all Chiapanecas. In 1960, forty-four land owners controlled twenty-five percent of the land in Chiapas. According to Benjamin, "Chiapas remains as before: a rich land and a poor people. . . . The distribution of power and wealth within Chiapas has changed very little since the 1950s--indeed, since the 1890s."[30]

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[29]Benjamin, 224.
[30]Ibid., 223.

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This is not to say that the expansion did not impact those at the base--the campesinos. During this period vast quantities of land were made available to Chiapas' landless. Over seventy thousand Ch'ol, Tzeltal and Tzotzil Maya were encouraged by the government to settle land in the delicate yet sparsely inhabited Lacandón rain forest located in the southwest corner of Chiapas.[31]

This resettlement effort had profound religious and political ramifications. For many campesinos the move (which some made voluntarily while others had little choice) was a sort of exodus. They compared themselves to the Israelites fleeing the oppression of the Egyptians. Their new settlements bore names like Nuevo Canan, Damasco and El Edén. The catequistas in the Lacandón forest encouraged this comparison. In 1972 they adopted "the Exodus" as their annual theme of study.[32] By relating biblical themes to the campesinos' daily lives, they hoped to affirm the campesinos' efforts and help them use their faith to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.[33]

Yet during the next three decades, the campesinos' promised land became their exile. Health care, schools, potable water and electricity were scarce. Unfamiliar with the rain forest, many campesinos unintentionally destroyed its fragile eco-system causing soil erosion, deforestation and the disappearance of many plant and animal species. In short, it was nearly impossible to sustain their families in the new communities. The allotments of land had done little to rectify the inequality which Benjamin identifies.

The Case of Hermosillo

The testimony of Carlos Morales Jimenez, a campesino who settled in the Selva Lacandón community of Hermosillo describes the important part the catequistas played

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[31]Ibid., 227.
[32]This catechism is discussed at length in Chapter Five.
[33]Iribarren, 69.

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in this colonization process. According to Morales Jimenez's history of the community, Hermosillo began in January 1973 with a few families living, until they could construct their houses, "beneath the trees for about five months."[34] Morales Jimenez recalls:

> In the year 1974 the community began to take shape. At this time the committee [from the community] went on a trip to Santa Rosa, [where some Brothers] asked if we wanted the Word of God, we accepted it and two Brothers came. Camelino and one who is dead, Nicolas. They taught us with this reading where it says to us in Saint Mark 4:1 about the sower. . . .[35]

These Brothers named another man, Elias, to be Hermosillo's catequista and he began teaching the faith to the people.

Morales Jimenez's description of the way the church established itself in the community is indicative of the way the church became involved in many communities during this time. Hermosillo was a small community, beginning from scratch. During a trip to one of the nearby villages the people encountered two Brothers who asked them if they wanted to experience the Word of God. The community members responded in the affirmative. After some time the two Brothers named the catequista, Elias, who worked with this community. According to Morales Jimenez the community freely chose to work with the church, contradicting a common criticism of the Catholic church in the diocese that it imposes its agenda on naive campesinos.[36] Also worthy of note is that the Brothers named the community's catequista. This was customary in the early years of the catechetical program, but, as noted above, changed as the church became more intent on developing a less hierarchical relationship with the indigenous people.

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[34]Carlos Morales Jiménez, "Testimonio de una comunidad de la selva lacandona," *textual: analisis del medio rural* (marzo 1985): 180.

[35]Ibid.

[36]This seems to have been the pattern throughout the diocese. Extensive research has uncovered no rejected overtures, leading one to assume either that rejection was not an option or, and more likely, that rejections were not widely publicized.

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By 1976 Brother Enrique joined Elias, and the community had two catequistas. Morales Jimenez notes that later Brother Enrique wanted to enlist Brother Ramiro as a catequista but Ramiro did not know how to read. An agreement was made to teach him to read so he could become a catequista. The work of a catequista involved reading and interpreting the Bible to community members. Given the scarcity of educational opportunities among the indigenous people, particularly those who had chosen to colonize isolated land within the *selva*, there was a limited number of people qualified to be catequistas. A certain prestige was, therefore, associated with the task.[37]

Morales Jimenez observes that life in the new community, Hermosillo, differed from the past. In earlier times, he explains:

> . . . our custom [was] to get together in our assemblies where only the authorities think and the authority of each member is not respected . . . we only come to play and tell stories. And the old people never share their thoughts, but only come to sleep. When various problems happen within the group, we do not get involved, only the authorities fix the problems. . . . According to our custom, celebrating *fiestas* is done inside the church, there the marimba is played and we dance. There we keep the liquor and cigarettes. We put them together with the saints.[38]

But after the move, the customs changed. "We do not understand why we do it, all this has lasted many years, starting from the years when we lived in Margaritas Las Bellas like the year 1960, and in the year 1973 the custom changed because we left our place and later formed other customs in the years 1974, 1975, 1976 and 1977."[39] Morales Jimenez reflects that the customs changed when the community moved from Margaritas Las Bellas to Hermosillo. Some might argue that in an attempt to overcome the instability inherent in starting a new community, its members would cling to the ways of the past. Instead the profound disruption of starting a new community

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[37]In his study of Christian Base Communities in Brazil, John Burdick discovered that the heavy emphasis on the leaders' and participants' literacy actually discouraged some people from participating in the Catholic Church's pastoral work. See John Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[38]Morales Jimenez, 181.

[39]Ibid.

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afforded the opportunity to break with the past. Among the factors contributing to this break was the presence of the Brothers and the formation of a catechetical program.[40] A reciprocal relationship developed. In the new communities there was an absence of religious leadership and community tradition, thus the catequistas were able to help create a way of life in which their presence was integral.

In the next few years the changes were solidified:

> On February second, 1978, we had a course about three elements: ideology, economy and the politics of the organic structure. Brother Amando presented this course to us. With this course we began to study about the authorities and the catequistas and the community, and to form groups to think better, because at the beginning only the authorities spoke and thought, but we saw that that was not good; the same that only the catequista speaks and thinks, this we saw was not good . . . because all of us [the men, women and children] have thoughts, like this, with the Word of God, we were learning to speak and to resolve our problems. . . .[41]

A few months later another course was held:

> We had a course in Histories, here in our own community. This course was given by Brother Amando. . . . In this course we changed our way of having meetings and some families left us because they said that now we were a union group; we continued ahead and we did not become discouraged, this was April first, 1978.[42]

Brother Amando taught a course which reshaped the way the community gathered and worked together. This outcome, rather than the content of the course, is what Morales Jimenez deemed worthy of recording. The volatile nature of the restructuring is evidenced by the fact that a number of families--concerned that the religious group was becoming too much like a union--decided to leave the community. Clearly in Hermosillo, the catequistas evolved into much more than religious educators, and as a result of their efforts the tension between religion and politics surfaced. Although

[40]Xóchitl Lleyva Solano notes a similar pattern; see Chapter Five, as does Jan Rus; see Chapter Six.

[41]Morales Jimenez, 182.

[42]Ibid., 181.

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Morales Jimenez emphasizes the religious developments, he does note that some in the community joined the Union Quiptic ta Lecubtesel in that same year, and community members began to attend the Union assembly, naming Fernando and Amando as delegates.[43]

Though rooted in biblical study their activities took on a decidedly socioeconomic tenor. The community began to share resources and work, as well as participate more actively in meetings. "Next," Morales Jimenez continues, "we had a course in the Bible and Christ and we said that only united could we bear fruit, as the Gospel of Saint John 15:1-11 tells us; within these limits, we see that the herdsmen are each for themselves, there is not one agreement. We see that it is not good and we put in common all the land for grazing. . . ."[44] Almost every afternoon the people got together in the church to talk about what the community needed.[45] In 1979 they constructed a school, a playing field and a fishing boat.

Morales Jimenez proudly describes the community's 1980 accomplishments. They worked the *milpa* in common and chose a person to go to a medical course who then gave the course to the community.[46] They chose a teacher from their own community; some women went to a course to learn how to make bread, and the community agreed to build a bread oven with money gathered collectively. Amando and Ramiro went to tailoring and carpentry courses and then bought a sewing machine with the help of the Sisters of Castalia (where they took the course), in order to open a tailoring business.[47] These were the types of projects the church encouraged through the work of its catequistas in the newly colonized communities. There was a strong emphasis on education, self help and local economic development. These projects,

[43]See Chapter Five for a more extensive discussion of the Quiptic.

[44]Moralez Jimenez, 182.

[45]It was these Bible passages, that according to Morales Jimenez, that supported them on their journey: Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37; 5:1-11; James 2:14-20; Corinthians 13:1-10; Matthew 7:21-23; Matthew 7:24-28; 12:33-37; Mark 6:34-44.

[46]A milpa is a maize field.

[47]Morales Jimenez, 183-184.

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while having an important economic impact, also fostered a strong sense of community which could contribute to political mobilization.

It was during this time, the late 1970s and early 1980s, that the notion of the church's preferential option for the poor began to take hold in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Morales Jimenez's summary of 1981 indicates that this occurred in Hermosillo. He explains, "In the year 1981 Christ was more in solidarity with us because he is the Christ of the poor."[48] During that year they did more building, hired a teacher, and on May eighth through twelfth Bishop Ruiz visited the community to confirm those chosen by the community to be prediaconos.[49]

The community of Hermosillo is a small, obscure settlement in the Selva Lacandón. It bears scrutiny because it is typical of many settlements of this period and in this area. The church's catequistas have been a consistent and formative presence since the community's inception. That they were there from the beginning meant the catequistas had the unique opportunity to help put in place the mechanisms which in many areas continue to guide community life.

Second Condition: Geographic Isolation and Cultural Diversity of the Diocese

The Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas covers forty-eight percent of the state of Chiapas. Geographic isolation and cultural diversity vastly complicate the task of less than one hundred priests and approximately one hundred and fifty religious who serve the people of the thousands of communities within the diocese. In spite of the thousands of kilometers of new roads, many communities, like those in the Selva Lacandón, can only be reached by arduous journeys on foot or horseback, making

[48]Ibid., 183.

[49]Drawing on the writings of the early church and the *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes* (Vatican II documents), the diocese set up a program for those chosen by the community to be ordained to be pre-deacons, to be ordained deacon following a three-year period. See Tangeman, *Mexico at the Crossroads*, 7-10.

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regular clerical visits impossible. Where roads do exist, many people do not have access to vehicles, making communication and travel between the communities, villages and cities infrequent at best.

This physical isolation is compounded by language and cultural barriers. The diocese is comprised of four primary indigenous groups--Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Ch'ol and Tojolabal--each of which has its own unique traditions and language. Over seventy-five percent of the Catholics who live in the diocese belong to one of these groups.[50] Although this is changing, many priests and religious are not conversant with the indigenous languages. Thus, in order to meet the religious needs of the indigenous communities, Bishop Ruiz and a few key priests empowered catequistas to provide religious guidance to their own communities. Most catequistas are bilingual. Serving communities where they were raised, the catequistas are intimately acquainted with their community's language, traditions and needs. Traveling regularly to various religious meetings and educational events, the catequistas provide a vital link between the religious and political power structure and their local community.

Although the diocese has had a seminary for over three hundred years and seventy-eight percent of the population of the diocese is indigenous, there are no indigenous priests in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.[51] A number of factors account for this. Lack of education is one. Many indigenous men do not attend primary or secondary school. In many areas schools do not exist. In areas where there are schools, they often are not bilingual, are located at great distance, or the families cannot afford to send their children and lose the labor of family members. Attending the university or seminary in preparation for the priesthood would be difficult.

Cultural factors also pose obstacles to the priesthood for indigenous people. For an indigenous man maturity is measured by marriage and family.[52] Age, studies or

[50] Iribarren, 5.

[51] *Documento de la Diócesis*, 5.

[52] Ninety percent of the catequistas are married, indigenous men.

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career are secondary. In most indigenous communities a man must be married in order to be given a cargo, or official responsibility within the community, as well as to become a full member of the community. Also, indigenous culture teaches that a man should cultivate the land; any other livelihood leaves him incomplete.

Given the obstacles raised by geographic isolation and cultural diversity, the promotion of catequistas as an alternative form of religious leadership was a logical and pragmatic response to the need of the church to minister to the indigenous communities. Having done this the church has created a well-trained, highly decentralized, network of indigenous leaders who are able to speak to their communities, with their communities, and on behalf of their communities, with authority derived from their special relationship to the church.[53]

Third Condition: The Presence of a Highly Politicized Hierarchy in the Diocese

During Vatican II (1962-1965) the Catholic church experienced a substantial repositioning. In 1968, the Catholic hierarchy of Latin America gathered in Medellín, Colombia to discern what these changes meant for Latin America. In 1979 they met again in Puebla, Mexico.[54] Bishop Samuel Ruiz García attended Vatican II in Rome, and the Medellín conference. Today, along with a small number of colleagues, Ruiz has embraced an agenda for change and continues to search for ways to capture the spirit of these theological renovations.[55] Under the direction of Ruiz, the diocese has attempted to raise the consciousness of the faithful, helping them to "understand the

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[53]It could be argued however that relegating indigenous men to the role of catequista is nonetheless a subtle form of racism and the effort that has gone into preparing catequistas should have been directed towards truly eradicating the racial barriers to the priesthood.

[54]See Chapter One for a more complete discussion of these events and the theological changes they precipitated.

[55]The October 1995 appointment of coadjutor, Raúl Vera, in the diocese may have significant impact on his work since coadjutors are often used to rein in bishops whose pastoral/political activity is deemed unacceptable by religious and/or political authorities.

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real context [in which they live, and] to locate the situation of our church in this reality."[56]

During Bishop Ruiz's tenure, the bishop and many of the priests of the diocese have become increasingly politicized. The church has engaged in a process of constant self-examination, continually re-evaluating and reshaping its work to reflect "the reality" within which it is working. The Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal is acutely aware of its political capacity which, critics have argued, is nurtured at the expense of theological or spiritual concerns.

In a document written by Dominican priest Pablo Iribarren, on the occasion of Bishop Ruiz's twenty-fifth anniversary in the diocese (1985), the socio-political analysis which shaped the work of the diocese was made explicit. Iribarren identified two factors strongly influencing the indigenous people in the diocese--the problem of land and autoctonous culture--which pushed them toward political organizations. The implication was that these two characteristics demanded action and the church had a choice between leaving this action to political organizations (which have, according to Iribarren, socialist tendencies) or becoming involved itself.

In his discussion of the first factor, the problem of land, Iribarren explains:

> One common factor of the indigenous and campesino population of the diocese is the problem of land created by the historical colonial usurpation, by the laws which stripped land from the ethnic natives, and by the manipulation in the application of the Agrarian Reform and by the corruption of justice. All this has been, and is, for the people, an explosive situation.[57]

He goes on to describe the factors that shape the indigenous people's perception of themselves and how this leads to their participation in political organizations:

> Other factors, in relation to the indigenous groups, are language, autoctonous culture, strong sense of community, and their own political

[56] *Líneas básicas para entender donde estamos* (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal (navidad 1978), 1, photocopied.

[57] Iribarren, 2.

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> and socio-religious structures inside their *pueblos*. Popular religiosity, traditions and their own deeply-rooted customs give them their own identity. All of this, together with poverty and marginalization, infuses them with a feeling of a social class. . . . The social conscience, the demands and the struggles have driven the people--searching for support--to the independent organizations which lack constitutional character and have socialist tendencies in varying degrees.[58]

These passages lay out the way in which the church perceives the indigenous community. Securing access to fertile, productive land has eluded much of Chiapas' indigenous population. Beginning in the 1950s, government officials promoted colonization of the Lacandón forest as a solution to increasing demands for land in the state's more populated highlands. Rather than resolve the problem, this served simply to transport the conflict and struggle to a more isolated region. Grappling with this reality shapes the identity of the indigenous people of Chiapas who also are characterized by their distinct language, culture, etc. (Catholic religious affiliation, interestingly, is not mentioned as an important identifying factor.) Iribarren concludes that given this identity, indigenous people have been driven to look for ways to deal with their problems. Their search for solutions has often meant affiliating themselves with independent organizations, some of which may be socialist. Iribarren implies that the tendency toward socialism among the people would be diminished if there were church-related alternatives to such organizations. The link between the people's lives and the desire to organize provides the backdrop for the work of the church which was, by that time, becoming more politicized.

According to Mexican social scientists Ovalle Muñoz and Pedro de Jesus, the government systematically attempted to block efforts, encouraged by some Catholic priests, to address the socio-political problems of the campesinos:

> Today, in Catholicism one finds a group of priests which through biblical teachings, tries to elevate the level of conscience of those exploited in the campo. In contrast, the Summer Linguistic Institute and

[58]Ibid.

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> a variety of religions (Adventists, Sabatistas, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, among others) in alliance with the State, have developed disruptive policies, methods of intervening and programs like COPLAMAR and those of the construction of clinics and roads, leaving to one side the fundamental problem of the campesinos: land.[59]

Muñoz and de Jesus argue that the government, in conjunction with less progressive religious groups, intentionally deflected the campesinos' attention from the real problem they face--the need for land redistribution--by offering them roads, clinics, etc.

In spite of these obstacles the Catholic bishop's and some priests' interest in and knowledge of the political reality--locally, nationally and internationally--facilitated the catequistas' evolution into a vital network. Communication--in both directions--shaped the catequistas' work: catequistas experienced poverty and injustice to which the church felt compelled to respond and some of its leadership offered analytical tools and resources which helped the catequistas identify and address the source of their problems. The bishop, many priests and catequistas found their credibility and effectiveness were strengthened by these interactions.

The way in which the work of the church encouraged the catequistas to transcend their traditional role is, in some ways, straightforward. Examining a community much like Hermosillo, Muñoz and de Jesus put it like this:

> . . . the support of the Catholic priests of the campesinos' struggles can be synthesized in the following manner: sharing biblical questions (for example, whether good work in the world opens the doors of heaven). The Catholic priests make the campesinos aware that life in the world is also important, that it is necessary to look for better ways of living. For this, organization--of daily life within the community (in work, the preparation of food, making clothing, housing, etc.) as well as in the community's external activities with various institutions which operate in the zone--is necessary.[60]

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[59]Ovalle Muñoz y Pedro de Jesus, "Movimientos campesinos en la zona tzeltal de Chiapas," *textual: analisis del medio rural* (mayo 1984), 65.
[60]Ibid.

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In other words, cooperation within the community is biblically based. All activity emerges from within the context of biblical reflection. The priests taught that God cares about this world and the daily lives of the campesinos, therefore acts to improve one's life are not only in keeping with God's will, but sanctioned by God. This message has been imparted to the catequistas, radically affecting their work in the communities.

* * *

The catequistas emerged in a period of resettlement of the Selva Lacandón which, together with their cultural diversity, geographic isolation, and the presence of a politicized church hierarchy enabled them to play an important political role. How the work of these lay leaders impacted the political system under which they live is the subject of the following three chapters.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Pilgrims' Progress: The Legacy of Las Casas

The work of the catequistas in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas reflects of the changes taking place within the Catholic church in that diocese. In the 1960s and early 1970s, this church was attempting to come to terms with the political realities surrounding it, stimuli for change resulting from Vatican II and Medellín, as well as more generalized societal pressures. In this chapter three historical events or phenomena will be considered: (1) An Indigenous Congress was held in 1974. Although church participation was crucial to the success of this event, some within the indigenous community were concerned that the church had crossed over the line and become too directive of the process. In spite of the tension, this event galvanized the church's commitment to ministry among the indigenous people which meant the work of the catequistas became more central to the church's work. (2) Throughout the period under consideration in this chapter (1960-1980) there was a marked expansion in the formation of popular organizations. Many pastoral agents and catequistas were instrumental in this process which at the time was ridden with conflict between Left-leaning political activists and religious leaders. (3) This struggle reached a peak when a 1978 overture from a political organization to join forces with the catequistas was rejected by the church. This was a defining moment since the increasingly politicized church was forced to clarify its role, in the political process, as one of accompaniment.

A careful examination of each of these reveals struggles between religious and indigenous leaders, between religious leaders and political organizers, and within the church itself, to determine how the church should serve the people of Chiapas as those people strove to build a better life for themselves. In *Political Reformism in Mexico,* Steven Morris raised the question, "Do political reforms unleash the forces driving

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fundamental political change or, instead, alleviate the pressures for change?"[1] His question is particularly relevant to this discussion of the role of the church in the democratization process. The activity of the church has had, and continues to have, a political impact in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas; whether this has helped or hindered the promotion of democracy is the issue at hand.

Catequistas and the Empowerment of Indigenous Peoples: Indigenous Congress, 1974

Throughout Mexico, the decade of the seventies witnessed an increase in the struggles in the *campo* (rural countryside). The government of president Luis Echeverría Alvarez (1970-76) turned its attention increasingly towards the agrarian sector, funneling resources to strengthen the rural infrastructure. Campesinos pressured the government to reinitiate agrarian reform throughout the whole country. The government acquiesced, hoping to reduce discontent and recapture the popularity gained by the reformism of President Cárdenas. In other words, the government hoped to gain control over the campesino masses, to use in the struggle against the party bosses and local agrarian bourgeoisie, among others.

The situation in the campo of Chiapas was no exception. The state government had begun to exploit systematically its natural resources such as rivers which generated hydroelectric power, timber and fertile farmland. These efforts led to direct conflict with an increasingly organized and unified campesino movement which was hard-pressed to identify the benefits it would receive from the damming of rivers, the clear cutting of the forests or the cordoning off of large areas of fertile farmland for cattle grazing. Policies proposed by Echeverría to address the type of concerns the campesinos in Chiapas were raising were carried out by governor Velasco Suarez. He

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[1]Stephen D. Morris, *Political Reformism in Mexico* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), 1.

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built roads to encourage economic development and oversaw the purchase of the lumber companies, theoretically ridding Chiapas of multinational corporations.[2] He also used the state's resources to bolster state-affiliated campesino organizations. In other words, ". . . Velasco Suarez revitalized official organizations in a campaign to control the indigenous communities and discourage the progressive tendency encouraged by the Catholic religion in the zone."[3] By the mid-1970s the Catholic church in Chiapas, according to some accounts, had become so influential that the state felt it necessary to rein it in. The government's strategy was to encourage organization among the opposition. The rationale was two-fold. First, an organized opposition would be a counterweight and second, such an organization could help identify rural leaders who could in turn be coopted.

It was in the context of these efforts to quell the growing unrest among the rural poor, that in 1974, the government requested diocesan assistance to organize an indigenous congress to commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, revered as the "Defender of the Indigenous." Government officials asked the Catholic church to help since the church already had close relationships with the indigenous communities. Bishop Ruiz agreed to assist with the congress on the condition that it would not be a "tourist" or *folklórico* event "but a gathering of indigenous in which they themselves are the ones who 'say their word.' . . ."[4] The diocesan officials enlisted the Marist Brothers (who had been instrumental in the formation of the catequistas' internado), the Jesuit Mission of Bachajón and the catequistas, who systematically recruited delegates and ultimately coordinated the three-day congress which took place in October 1974 in San Cristóbal de Las Casas.[5]

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[2] "Chiapas en la coyuntura centro americana," *Caminante* 36 (octubre-noviembre 1984): 22-23.

[3] Muñoz y de Jesus, 66.

[4] Jesús Morales Bermúdez, "El congreso indígena de Chiapas: un testimonio," in *Anuario 1991* (México D.F.: Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura, 1992), 245.

[5] Juan Ojeda, "25 años de la misión de Guadalupe," *Caminante* 45 (octubre 1988): 17.

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For over a year prior to the three-day gathering, with the assistance of many pastoral agents, indigenous people gathered in their communities to prepare for the meeting. In order to ensure the participation and response of authentic community leaders, those who gathered represented the community's civil and religious leadership.[6] A Jesuit priest, Mardonio Morales, who helped four hundred Tzeltal communities prepare for the congress describes the process this way:

> All of this has as its historical source the experience of the struggle for human dignity begun by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. The question prodding us was: in our life today have the efforts of Fray Bartolomé gained our liberty, our dignity, our autonomous development and solidarity?[7]

The simple answer to Mardonio's question was: no. Communities compiled booklets, documenting injustice and oppression to which they had been and still were subjected. Together they arrived at the theme of the congress, "equality in justice," which would focus on problems of land, trade, health and education. But the road to "equality in justice" was not smooth. Some indigenous leaders objected to what they believed was an invasive role played by the church in the preparatory meetings.

In at least one case the convener of a preparatory gathering invoked the authority of the government's Office of Socio-Economic Development of the State of Chiapas (PRODESCH) when summoning the indigenous authorities to discuss the congress. This was done intentionally in order to separate the religious from the political. The convener drew on the secular structure of the communities: their ejidal and municipal authorities. In some cases catequistas were also political authorities or *responsables* in their communities so complete separation was not possible.[8] Jesús Morales Bermúdez, the last president of the Indigenous Congress, noted the tension

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[6]"Congreso indígena," *Caminante* 26 (agosto 1980): 56.

[7]Mardonio Morales, "La conquista a los ojos de los tzeltales actuales," *Encuentros* 8 (mayo-junio 1992): 17.

[8]Bermúdez, 246.

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between those community leaders who emerged from a vibrant and powerful vein of diocesan organizing and those who objected to the church's influence on the process.[9] He pointed out that the use of PRODESCH had been effective in securing indigenous participation; almost all of the ejidos sent representatives to that preliminary meeting. But these representatives, who went expecting to receive benefits from the government, felt betrayed and many turned around and began the four or five hour journey back home when they realized that no government representatives were in attendance. Adding to their feelings of betrayal was their discovery that the meeting was to be held in the church, an institution which some of them believed threatened their indigenous customs and traditions.[10] Given the lack of respect for indigenous culture demonstrated by the way in which the church initially chose, trained and deployed catequistas in the communities, this conclusion was not unfounded.[11]

The process surrounding the organization of the congress helped precipitate a shift in the way the church worked within the indigenous communities and the way the communities perceived the church. According to Morales Bermúdez, greed and distrust were prevalent at those early meetings. Many found it impossible to engage in a project with the government which had betrayed them so many times before. Some of those who were willing to be involved stayed only long enough to determine how they might benefit materially from participating. Still those who remained and participated became "charismatic, eloquent apostles" in their promotion of the congress.

The congress gathered more than fifteen hundred delegates from one thousand communities, representing four hundred thousand people, providing a setting in which indigenous people of Chiapas addressed issues such as economic exploitation, the need for land, the destruction of their culture and human rights abuses. The first day was

[9]Jesús Morales Bermúdez held office until 1977.
[10]Bermúdez, 247.
[11]See Chapter Four for a more detailed discussion of this topic.

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spent discussing the issue of land. The second day focused on trade and education, and the third on health. The process was straightforward. Each language group presented a sort of history of its experiences--the common denominator always seemed to be "misery, expulsion, injustice and violence."[12]

> The civil and religious authorities listened dumbfounded to the strong clear words, spoken without hate by the indigenous people, which denounced the plunder of their land, the infinite abuses by the bureaucracy and the subjection to a law and a language which was not theirs.[13]

There was time for questions and answers, and then the congress separated into language groups where participants received written translations of all the presentations and discussed the implications of these presentations. One of the largest obstacles to be overcome during the congress was language. Members of five distinct language groups--Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, Ch'ol and Spanish--were present. Each language group agreed to provide ten translators. Each presenter spoke in his own language which was then translated in writing for the other groups.

The presence of the church was strong throughout the congress. In spite of the tension between some of the traditional indigenous leaders and the church, the success of this congress was due in large part to the catequistas' ability to draw on well-organized networks within their communities. And thus the catequistas and the communities they served claimed their place at the heart of the church. Bishop Ruiz believed that the indigenous delegates appreciated the potential of the church to aid their struggle: "They asked the church (which they knew was not a political party, nor a political alternative, but a social force), to lend its support and its prophetic voice" to their cause.[14]

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[12]Ojeda, 18.
[13]Morales, 18.
[14]Ruiz, *Carta Pastoral*, 26.

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Clear in their analysis and focused in their demands, the participants laid the groundwork for an organizational network which would facilitate communication and encourage unified action. The congress, initiated by the government, essentially escaped its control and was appropriated by the indigenous people. In retrospect Muñoz and de Jesus conclude:

> The congress was critically important for the campesinos who, dancing to their own music instead of dancing to the music prepared by the state, demonstrated unity, force and palpable evidence of progressive potential, in the presence of a confused state.[15]

A group leadership was set up to carry on the work after the congress. It consisted of a president, a Marist brother and sociologist from the Tojolabal Zone; and a secretary general, a Tzeltal man from Tenejapa. Although there were organizational advances, regional interests eventually impeded the work. For example, in 1976 there was a land invasion of the ejido Lázaro Cárdenas in Huitiupán. Some members of the congress participated and supported this action without the knowledge of the whole congress. Morales Bermúdez describes what happened:

> The [land invasion] was decided in an autonomous manner and thus put a reality on the table: the inappropriateness of the impudence of agreements and of collegial decision-making--inappropriate due to the lack of expedient communication and the difficulty of reconciling interests with frequent diversions, and of frequently tardy negotiations. . . .[16]

The president was unable to reconcile the friction between regional and general interests. At the end of the year he left his position with the Indigenous Congress. But as Morales Bermúdez explains, the departure was also a consequence of increasing tension between religion and politics:

> [The president's] renunciation and the land takeover coincided. It was not, however, this succession of events which determined his action.

[15]Muñoz y de Jesus, 66. The government was subsequently threatened by the power it had inadvertently unleashed.

[16]Bermúdez, 261.

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> Better yet questions of his religious commitment decided it. This confirms the limit of the responses of the religious toward the popular organizations; a moment arrived demanding more loyalty to the ecclesiastical institution than the political process . . . .[17]

In January of the following year Morales Bermúdez, a mestizo from the Ch'ol Zone, was named president, and a new secretary general, from Huitiupán, was also selected. Following an intense discussion it was agreed that the Indigenous Congress organization should be more political and popular-based. The following short and long term goals were agreed upon:

1. The Long Term
   The Indigenous Congress would pursue change in the current socio-economic system for a society in which there is no private property in the methods of production.
2. The Short Term
   a. to awaken the proletariat conscience in ourselves and our communities
   b. to constitute ourselves as a truly independent organization
   c. to continue programming political, economic and ideological struggles, with the suppositions that they imply[18]

After the Marist renounced the presidency, the congress adopted a much more radical stance. The desire to become a truly independent organization was made explicit. This is often interpreted to mean independent from, among others, church influence. The implication is that the church presence was a hindrance to radical change since leaders with connections to the church ultimately were more loyal to the church than to the formation of a popular organization.

The separation from the church and the adoption of short and long term goals marked a new, but unsuccessful, phase for the congress. In March 1977, Morales Bermúdez issued the following statement:

> The Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Indigenous Congress began with the goal of being the greatest assembly of representatives of indigenous communities from the four zones that participated. This assembly

[17]Ibid.
[18]Ibid.

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> attempted to secure communication and relations among indigenous of distinct ethnicities; to share their common problems and be able to denounce them openly; it was said that "the indigenous have voice." [Once] Fray Bartolomé denounced [injustice] in their place. Now there is no Fray Bartolomé, nor is there need of one. The indigenous himself needs to demonstrate that he is not a child nor a second class man. In one of the final discourses, the former president of the Indigenous Congress said with grand emotion: "Now, who will be Bartolomé, the new Bartolomé? Will there be one? No brothers, Bartolomé now is us, is our communities, is the united indigenous communities, yes only like this can they have force. Because unity is the force of the communities." It can be said that the goal which secured the proposed objectives was reached.[19]

Unable to overcome the discord and polarization that still plagued the congress, the president concluded his statement by dissolving the congress. March 17, 1977, was the last gathering of the Indigenous Congress. Organizational work continued, but no longer under the auspices of the congress.

Looking back on this experience Morales Bermúdez discussed the limits of the congress. He explained that the platform and the method of organization were problematic as was the role of the church. In Morales Bermúdez's final statement (quoted above) he claimed that the church, in a figurative but also in a more literal sense, was no longer needed as the voice of the indigenous.[20] The indigenous were ready to speak for themselves. The church without doubt provided much of the initial organizational impetus for the congress, even to the point of having a Marist as its president for three years. But from the outset there were problems with this relationship. Many indigenous leaders objected vigorously to the church wielding such influence and eventually after the congress there came a point when the Marist president simply could no longer preside. There was also a struggle among those within the church as they attempted to balance their commitment to the church as an institution and their call to ministry to the poor. Morales Bermúdez puts it this way:

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[19] Ibid., 262.

[20] In an interview quoted in Chapter Seven, Jan de Vos laments that this claim is, in his opinion, indeed false. The church continues to preserve its power in relation to the indigenous people.

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> From the beginning, part of the church, in mission and with a "converted" bishop was predisposed in good measure towards the congress. Part of its members remained faithful to their institution, at times more than to the process. This dichotomy divided those committed ministerially or congregationally to the church. They must be for her. They feel, on the other hand, that the place of their mission is the world of the poor and in transition toward "another life," more just, more dignified. . . .[21]

In other words, the well-intentioned bishop and much of his church were committed to the mission to the poor and therefore they tried to participate in the process initiated by the congress. However, they found their loyalties divided between the church and the popular process and in the end remained faithful to the former. This tension was indicative of the church's relationship to the indigenous communities at this point. Still embedded in its hierarchical power structure, some of the church leadership saw only limited points of convergence between the completion of its mission and the indigenous communities.

This situation raised important questions: was it imperative to choose between the church, and political and cultural loyalty to the indigenous communities? Were the goals and objectives so distinct that there were only limited points of convergence, no way to incorporate one into the other? Secular organizers were eager to minimize church participation and influence in their work (later the opposite would be true). For its part the church had begun, in the course of the congress, to awaken to the call to minister to the indigenous people, and grapple with the political implications of this calling.

Accounts of the Indigenous Congress by religious leaders in the diocese seldom mentioned the strife within the organization or the tension between the popular organization and the church, painting a more rosy picture of the congress and its

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[21] Bermúdez, 274.

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achievements. Iribarren's assessment is representative of the church's perspective. He lists the following as the achievements of the congress for the indigenous people:

> 1. Becoming conscious of their cultural pluralism (there were groups that had never dealt with each other because of distance and isolation);
> 2. Discovering that their problems were very similar and that they could be explained by other things--such as the general crushing by poorly functioning structures of society;
> 3. Learning that their united voices had force and could achieve changes if they organized to attain them; and
> 4. Discovering that the Plan of God was not their existing situation of misery and marginalization, but that God had other projects more just and kind for them. The achievement of these was impeded by ambition monopolized by the powerful and by the lack of adequate channels for their voices.[22]

The congress also, according to Iribarren, had positive consequences for the pastoral agents:

> 1. They saw the considerable capacity of the indigenous to organize themselves, acquiring confidence in them.
> 2. They saw a liberating process, for which they must provide critical evangelical support, made manifest.
> 3. They saw the need to revise all their pastoral action and relocate it where the acute problem was. . . .[23]

In some ways it seems this event was more important for the church than for the indigenous people. The congress' effect on the church as an organization was profound. The catequistas' networks proved their vitality, earning greater respect from priests and religious. At the same time the conviction of the religious leadership, especially the bishop, to support the liberating process of the indigenous people--the majority group of the diocese--intensified.

The congress as an organization dissolved in 1977, but the Catholic church in the diocese had been galvanized by the process and seriously began to explore its own

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[22]Iribarren, 6.
[23]Ibid., 7.

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political role. In November 1975 there was a general meeting of the priests, religious and laity of the diocese, the first diocesan assembly. This three-day meeting was convened to put into place plans for each zone. The concluding document of this gathering called for commitment to "the work with the poor and for the poor" and "to create a favorable atmosphere for the formation of an autoctonous church. . . ."[24]

The concept of creating an autoctonous church was a key factor in determining the way the diocese worked. But the church's commitment to this goal raised some critical questions. Did the move towards an autoctonous church create an environment in which the indigenous people could establish themselves as responsible, independent leaders, and achieve at least some degree of power? Or did an autoctonous church separate and isolate the indigenous people, making it easier to ignore their demands and/or control and manipulate them? Did the opportunity to achieve prominence in the autoctonous church lessen the indigenous person's desire to work within the secular political sphere and make demands on secular power structures? Or did the autoctonous church empower indigenous people providing a base--organizationally and theologically (ideologically)--from which to challenge the political system or at least enter the political arena? The search for answers to these questions will help illuminate the church's role in the democratization process.

In his closing message to this landmark assembly, Samuel Ruiz tried to interpret the implications of adopting a preferential option for the poor. Iribarren recorded Ruiz's comments:

> [The bishop] questions the old structures in the new path in favor of the oppressed and detects the diversity of positions in "the diocese which is considered pluralist." . . . explaining the man in this diocese who has a different mentality and is not searching, I believe does not have a place. We are searching, that is the path of the Gospel and this search is toward the oppressed, toward the poor, that is the destination of the Gospel. . . .

[24]Ibid.

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> At the beginning there is not a demand for uniformity nor that all occupy the same place . . . that which is asked is the willingness to walk.
>
> In sum: Our bishop is restless about the new winds that blow in South America, by the restlessness of many pastoral agents of the diocese and by the awakening of the indigenous campesino people, he wants to suggest to his collaborators gathering in an assembly, a new path and support the creativity of the diocese.[25]

Ruiz's comments, made in 1975, one year after the Indigenous Congress, describe a search for a new way for the church to work. Those who are not willing to search for the way the Gospel can serve the poor, he explains, "do not have a place." At this point the bishop knew that he wanted the church to respond more directly to the needs of the poor. It was less clear what form that response would take.

The discussion continued at the September 1976 assembly. In retrospect this gathering has been heralded as the assembly of the "Option for Popular Power," where the church truly began "to feel the demands of the people outside society and of the church as an agent of its own destiny."[26] The church was moving into a proactive position as it continued to define its ministry.

The plenary sessions of this assembly reached the following conclusions:

> 1. We are conscious of living in an oppressive system which acts aggressively and in an organized manner operating at all levels and areas of human life. This oppression is clearly sinful.
> 2. Our diocesan pastoral action tries to encourage a change of conscience, this oppressive system in which we live and are involved must be transformed into a more just society. . . .
> 3. Our pastoral action cannot be authentically evangelical if it does not confront the economic, political and ideological situation of a system which appears as a manifestation of egoism and sin.
> 4. Our faith commitment can be lived authentically only if it is Good News for the poor and for the oppressed and if it excites, supports and encourages the liberating process of the oppressed.[27]

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[25]Ibid., 8.
[26]Ibid., 12.
[27]Ibid., 10.

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The assembly agreed to respond to these conclusions by struggling against the sinful system:

> Above all we cannot lose ourselves in theoretical speculation, but we must continually and actively situate ourselves in the practical dimension, constantly exercising the creation of "popular power" which is going to have in each step ambiguous and contradictory characteristics. . . . To discover with a continual analysis, each time deeper and more concrete, of the strategy of the oppressor. . . . We need to undertake the work of discovering and dynamizing the potential of creating and strengthening a strategy of the oppressed, which carries forth a way of agreeing with the Plans of God, following the Gospel.[28]

In 1976 the church openly identified the "oppressive system," under which society was living, as sinful, and committed itself to the transformation of that system. This was to be done by "creating a popular power" and dynamizing the strategy of the oppressed. It is interesting to note the use of the plural: *Plans* of God. Also there is recognition that the process would be "ambiguous," "contradictory," and in constant need of evolution.

Although these general theological tenets were agreed upon at the 1976 assembly, consensus was not achieved regarding the organization of the diocese. Members of the assembly had hoped to find ways of organizing that would reflect the changes taking place in the pastoral work and encourage a forward-looking and creative path. A key factor was the need for more open channels of communication. Individual communities, they reasoned, could not build the Kingdom of God; it was necessary for them to work in concert:

> . . . being isolated one cannot respond to the Christian vocation of the construction of the Kingdom of God. . . . The strength of the pastoral processes demands *interrelation*. . . .[29]

The need for more efficient coordination of the processes was also discussed. The assembly concluded: "It is necessary to create channels, suitable instances, for the

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[28]Ibid., 11.
[29]Ibid., 13.

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coordination of the processes between zones if the work is to be agile, secure and effective."[30]

The source of the problem was thought to be rooted in the structure of the diocese itself:

> We are conscious that our diocese still adheres to verticalism, not in accord with the evangelical spirit and the intimate essence of the church, sent as an instrument of Christ to give new life to all men, to make them brothers and participate in the same spirit. It is necessary to exercise authority as the authentic service to the people. This implies the growing *participation* of avenues of genuine representation and the establishment of conditions favorable for those who receive the ministry of authority; it can be carried out in favor of the same people of God.[31]

The diocesan emphasis on bolstering the pastoral work of the catequistas had begun to take shape. A diffuse, decentralized, loosely linked network emerged. This added to the democratic potential of the catequistas' work, since the catequistas had the opportunity to develop credibility as semi-independent community leaders. Decentralization also had certain shortcomings. In order to garner support, encouragement and guidance from the diocese and give the same to the diocese, the catequistas had to be connected to each other and to the church. The church worked on the local level--encouraging catequistas and pastoral workers to organize to meet the spiritual, political and economic needs of their communities--and on the diocesan level persisting in its attempts to redefine its ministry in light of its new understanding of the poor indigenous people who comprised the majority of the faithful.

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[30]Ibid.
[31]Ibid.

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The Religious and the Political: Popular Organizing

As the church became more and more involved in popular organizing during the 1970s, difficult questions and conflicts began to arise: How far should the church extend itself into the political arena? How would the church relate to secular initiatives to organize the poor?

The church was not the only sector active in the formation of popular organizations in the post-Vatican II, post-Indigenous Congress period. Many Left-leaning secular organizers also found the conditions of this time and this place conducive to the achievement of their initiatives. Encounters between the religious and secular were often tense during this time, in spite of many shared goals.

The municipality of Ocosingo is where much of the organizing took place. It covers an area of about fourteen thousand square kilometers, mostly in the selva. At the beginning of the century the area's sole occupants lived on the few *fincas* (vast estates) which were circumjacent to the dense selva. (Only the lumber companies entered the interior, using the rivers which extended to the ports of Campeche, to extract precious wood to export.) The majority of the campesinos who lived on the fincas were landless. The few who managed to secure their own plots had been granted property that was not adequate for farming, the fertile land being in the hands of finqueros (estate owners).[32]

In the mid-1960s, some indigenous campesinos decided to leave their homes and the "protection" of their finquero to settle national lands in the selva set aside by the government for this purpose.[33] They traveled for weeks looking for a place to settle. They planted crops and then returned to their former homes for their wives and children. Many new communities including Hermosillo, discussed in detail in Chapter

[32]"Quiptic ta Lecubtesel," *Caminante* 30 (mayo 1983): 26.

[33]The finquero provided the only avenue of access available to many campesinos for commercial relations. Many were also dependent on the finquero to fulfill religious obligations. Often, the chapel was located on the finca, whose owner was the chapel's patron. Each year the priest celebrated the *fiesta patronal* during which couples would be wed and children baptized and confirmed.

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Four, were formed in this manner. It was a difficult life filled with disease, hunger and very hard work. "But," one observer explained, "in this way the Tzeltals returned to the selva which had been taken from them by the conquistadors. . . ."[34]

Social scientist Xóchitl Lleyva Solano explains that during this process of colonization, which began in the 1960s and continued through the 1980s, each group made it a bit closer to the heart of the selva. She also points out that people did not loose touch with those they had left behind because the new communities were formed directly from the old and so connections were maintained.[35] However these new *colonias* often were characterized by marked breaks with the past. Some traditions were left behind and replaced by new ways; others, once forgotten, were reclaimed and revitalized. The resettlement effort had a profound religious and political impact. The colonizers' pursuit of a new life coupled with the difficult living conditions meant the region was a fertile ground for religious workers espousing a change-oriented theology and Left-leaning political organizers.

"Theology," Lleyva observes, "was the perfect door to escape a past of 'oppression and misery' lived on the fincas. It was impossible, from the point of view of the colonia, to recreate life in the selva without undertaking a drastic rupture with the past. The present in the selva colonia could not be a mere continuation of what happened on the finca. On the contrary, it was necessary that a radical rupture arise and be an alternative, liberating option."[36] The changes evidenced in Hermosillo illustrate such a rupture. Faith helped maintain the courage of the campesinos, who, although no longer beholden to the finquero, still lived in dire poverty. Encounters with these groups of settlers, from which a number of energetic catequistas emerged,

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[34]"Quiptic ta Lecubtesel," 26.

[35]Xóchitl Lleyva Solano, "Militancia politico-religiosa e identidad en la Lacandona," *Espiral estudios sobre estado* y *sociedad* (enero-abril 1995): 62.

[36]Ibid., 68.

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also profoundly affected pastoral workers in the area, such as Sister Mary Cafferty. She recalls:

> Because of the distances and the scarcity of missionaries, the indigenous catequistas had to work without depending much on the presence of the priest and maybe because of this, they were developing their leadership capacity more and more.
>
> The enthusiasm of the catequistas always inspired us. The simple faith of the people was admirable, but even more we began to understand the situation in which we found ourselves; the more we got to know the people the more discontent we felt. In spite of much religious activity, we saw the people dominated by poverty so embedded that it seemed impossible to solve or alleviate.
>
> The catequistas came to the meetings and learned to read their copies of the New Testament. When the priest visited the communities it was a special occasion: children were baptized, young people were married, many confessed and took communion, but in spite of all this, life did not get better. It seemed that faith did not give a response to the vital problems of the community.[37]

In 1970, the religious workers assigned to this region began to analyze the social, economic and political situation of the new settlers. Using this analysis they developed a new methodology for the catechism. A few years later they collected information on agrarian reform, migration, production, education and health, and designed a catechetical course using the book of Exodus, which had already helped shape these campesinos' faith. Exodus was adopted "because this is the central theme of the history of Salvation and it is a faith response of a determined people, which could illustrate the commitment of the Tzeltal community after the analysis of their own experience."[38] Lleyva explains that the Exodus catechism changed the relationship of the catequistas to their communities. "[It is] a new catechism in which the communities, and not the catequistas, are the center of the doctrinal attention. That is

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[37] "Quiptic ta Lecubtesel," 27-29.
[38] Ibid.

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to say, the communities and their members stop being passive recipients while the catequistas only 'recover and spread the word.'"[39]

The new catechism was created from taped community discussions. (Initially the discussions were synthesized by pastoral agents but soon indigenous catequistas took charge of this task.) Entitled "We Are Looking for Liberty," and written in Tzeltal, it grew out of study of and reflections on sacred texts in the context of daily life and community history of the Cañadas."[40]

The new catechism underscored the notion that the campesinos' quest to eradicate poverty, first on the finca and then in the newly settled communities, was consonant with God's will. It emphasized that God was with them in this struggle to rid their lives of poverty. It was these ideas, rooted in Catholic social doctrine, which helped provide a framework for popular organizing.

The following excerpts of the Exodus catechism demonstrate the way in which migration to the selva was linked to the Hebrew exodus and how this connection helped reorient various indigenous communities toward a politically and spiritually powerful inclusivity, rather than separation or dividedness:

> *As you said, Señor, to those ancient Israelites when they lived as slaves: "I have seen the suffering of my people. I have heard them crying, asking for my help. I go to liberate them from their oppressors and take them to a good and spacious land which produces good fruit." (Ex 2:7-8).*
>
> God wants us to go to liberty, as the ancient Jewish people. The Jewish people lived on the land, of other people, called Egypt. The land was not theirs; they worked as slaves lacking many necessities. Therefore God spoke to the hearts of some of the principal [leaders of the people], and he said:
>
> *"I have seen the suffering of my people, I have heard the tears [lamentations] that the overseers bring forth. I came down to liberate them from their suffering and I am going to take them to another, better*

[39] Lleyva, 69.
[40] Ibid. The Cañadas refers to the secluded narrow valley area in western Chiapas.

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land. And God said to Moses: I send you to take my people from Egypt, I will be your God and will be with you always, helping you." (*Ex 3:7-12*).

God wants us to leave all that oppresses us. The word of God tells us that as a community we must leave in search of liberty. God said that if we are looking for something better and liberty, he will be accompanying us.

When the Israelites lived as slaves they had to leave and fight to construct liberty. When our ancestors lived as servants they also had to fight together to secure their lands. These were men of great FAITH, and they showed it with their work. Because of their FAITH and their struggle, today we have land and we live free in colonias and ranchos. But true liberty still has not been achieved. We still have to gather force in our hearts and struggle and suffer much. We have to struggle against poverty, hunger and injustice.

Brothers, we are waiting with much joy for the complete fulfillment of the promise of God. Since ancient times God has promised men a new land, saying: *"I have come down to liberate my people from oppression and to take them to a vast and fertile country; a land flowing with milk and honey."*[41]

But the *new land* requires a *new man,* the catechetical book says:

The new man is not a man alone [a single man], but a communitarian man, united with all his brothers by the spirit.

Among all there is only one thought, one work, one heart with the same hope.[42]

. . . all that we do as a community, we become one heart in Christ. The work and the love of the community is that which carries us to liberty. The community wants to determine with laws the things which must be done in daily life. The community is a thing which we must make day to day.[43]

The catequistas using the new catechism, promoted the participation of the whole community. They believed it was necessary to talk, share opinions, read the Word of God, sing and contribute to community assemblies. In this way the work of

[41]Ibid., 70.
[42]Ibid., 71.
[43]Ibid., 72.

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the church helped overcome cultural separation and language barriers prevalent among indigenous communities. According to Lleyva this catechism's thrust toward an inclusive community helped supersede the long-standing divisions between various indigenous communities:

> The pastoral action practiced in the 1970s was a point of departure to recreate the feeling of community. . . . This sentiment of belonging embraces from the outset a general and universal tenet in the theology of liberation, which understands that all are poor.[44]

Political organizers also came to the selva to struggle against poverty and injustice and to dismantle the structures which perpetuate them. In 1975, the government tried to remove three thousand of the recently settled Tzeltal and Ch'ol families, claiming they were living on land designated for use by sixty-six Lacandón families. The Tzeltal and Ch'ol families in these communities had become closely connected to the pastoral work of the church and the popular organization, Unión del Pueblo, through their active participation in the Indigenous Congress. With the help of these groups and forty-five neighboring communities, they successfully blocked the entrance of the civil engineers sent to map the boundaries of the area, and secured their land. Empowered by their success, in January 1977, after a year of organizing, more than sixty communities created the Union Ejidal Quiptic ta Lecubtesel (Tzeltal for "our strength is unity for progress"), an independent union of campesino collectives.[45]

Given the proximity of both the religious workers and the political organizers to the campesinos who founded the Quiptic ta Lecubtesel, there has been considerable discussion of the role of each in this influential organization's inception. A diocesan publication explains it this way:

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[44]Ibid., 66.

[45]For more detailed description of this and other popular organizations, see Neil Harvey, "Peasant Strategies and Corporatism in Chiapas," in *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico,* eds. Joe Foweraker and Ann L. Craig, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990).

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> The development of Quiptic is a concrete example of the accompaniment of the church which illuminates the path of the people. With trials, doubts, and errors the people walk; the church is close to the people and supporting them in their walk, finds its own boundary which affirms and sets the bounds of its identity.[46]

In other words the church perceives its contribution--accompaniment--as a crucial factor in the development of the Quiptic. Its participation in this work helped clarify the church's understanding of its own political identity, which was necessarily limited. Lleyva concurs, although placing less emphasis on religious initiatives:

> The pastoral practice has an eminently political character owed to the attacks against the prevailing power system; nevertheless, of the former it cannot be inferred that the Mission was the promotion of the Union of Ejidos Quiptic, rather it was the influence of the Indigenous Congress and the concrete work of militants of different political-ideological currents which encouraged the crystallization of this organization.[47]

Throughout this period, popular organizing efforts gained momentum and were able to demonstrate considerable influence. In 1976 the Línea Proletariat (LP) was formed when Política Popular (PP) joined with, among other groups, the Unión del Pueblo. Política Popular had emerged in the wake of the 1968 student movement based in Mexico City, its primary leader being Adolfo Orive Berlinguer, an economics professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.[48] Radical left organizers, pursuing a class struggle against the exploiter bourgeoisie, lived with the campesinos in Chiapas and shared their hardships. Religious initiatives--which had worked mainly for incremental change within the system to support local economic development, improve education and to secure land claims--were considered by some campesinos to be painfully slow and lacking in real accomplishment. The political organizers, many of whom advocated a Maoist "mass line" to promote structural change, criticized the pastoral efforts of the church which the Línea believed singled out certain men for

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[46]"Quiptic ta Lecubtesel," 25.
[47]Lleyva, 73.
[48] Harvey, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, 29.

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leadership positions as catequistas, thereby perpetuating the problematic hierarchical power structure. This message appealed to some campesinos who had grown weary of waiting for religious initiatives to satisfy their needs.

In spite of their differences, the work of the religious and political organizers tended at times to be complimentary. "The political structure," Lleyva notes, "superimposed itself on the religious, and even though apparently they had serious differences in rhythm, discourse and strategies, in daily [life] the Línea came to reinforce and dynamize the communitarian sentiment and the supralocal forms of organization like the union of ejidos."[49] Still the tension between religious and political organizers was acute. Some on the Left accused the church of not taking into account the political consequences of their pastoral work. The church, on the other hand, claimed that some political parties were trying to control the popular process from the outside for partisan political motives.

The struggle between political organizers and pastoral workers became so intense that it was the primary topic of debate at a number of diocesan assemblies held during this period.[50] Participants at one such assembly discussed the drawbacks of becoming too closely involved with political issues:

> One of the dangers is the consideration of evangelism as merely a step or trampoline towards the political. Evangelism is reduced to a stage of conscientization prior to political exercises, so that the political field begins to be seen as the perfect field of action. Consequently, within this logic, having the political in the hands of the conscious people, it is necessary to abandon announcing the Good News.[51]

The Gospel, the assembly concluded, was not meant to be used solely as a stepping stone to political action. The possibility of involvement with the political,

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[49] Lleyva, 74.

[50] The representative assembly is the diocesan body, including priests, religious and pastoral workers, which gathers regularly to discuss the affairs of the diocese.

[51] Iribarren, 28.

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leading to rivalries between religious and political organizers. was also addressed by the assembly:

> The other danger is when the church has opted for the poor and realizes that announcing the Gospel has encouraged conscientization (organization and politicization) among the people; but when other power arises, when other people arrive that have something political to offer the people, the church feels its power is disputed and persists in wanting to maintain [unconsciously] control of that which began from its action. Therefore mutual accusations follow: the pastoral agents accuse the political agents of not teaching all "the facts" and these in turn accuse the church of continuing to fight for control of the processes.[52]

The discussion of these issues--the perception that religious teaching was solely a "trampoline" toward the political and the power struggles between religious and political organizers--grew out of the reality facing the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

Political Organization Overture, 1978

By 1978, the tables had turned, and in the eyes of the secular world the church's political utility became not only evident but undeniable. Accounts of the 1978 gathering of the representative assembly document that a significant part of this meeting was spent considering a request from an "independent political organization" that wanted to work among the "*bases diocesanas.*"[53] This political organization had "a certain affinity with various projects and actions" in the diocese, which included the promotion of land reform, working against economic exploitation and human rights abuses, and pursuing more adequate health care and education. It hoped to capitalize on the extensive and energetic network which the catequistas had developed. The report of the meetings states:

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[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid., 15.

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> The representative assembly clearly understood that what the organization was looking for was a popular base like the diocese had, especially to profit from the catequista ministerial movement.[54]

Although official church documents do not name "the political organization," Jesuit Mardonio Morales discussed this overture in detail in a 1993 interview with the national periodical, p*roceso*. Morales explained that the organization was the Línea Proletaria, and Adolfo Orive himself addressed the church's representative assembly. Morales recalled being impressed by the organization which Orive had developed in Torreón and Monterrey. Then, according to Morales, Orive made a proposal.

> He said, "Here in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, after the Indigenous Congress of 1974, the church has carried out very profound work in the communities. There are some magicians of pastoral work. But without offending anyone, you do not have any preparation for the strictly political organization. I am here to make you an offer: you will be in charge of the pastoral work and we will be in charge of the political organization. You have the communities in your hands; this way we can carry out our work."[55]

During his interview, Morales recounted:

> The proposition was tempting. [Orive] left so we could discuss it. In general terms it seemed dishonest to us to hand over the communities to persons who, even though they seemed very well-meaning, were foreign. It would have been a kind of agreement among elites. . . . It seemed to us that it was not a good idea to align ourselves with them, that if they wanted to enter and work in the communities we were not going to close the doors but neither were we going to deliver the communities to them.[56]

Thus after extensive debate the assembly rejected the Línea's overtures and the relationship ended. Two points are worthy of note: first, the organization's very serious interest in the work of the catequistas indicated that the catequistas had something politically useful to offer; second, the assembly's equally serious

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[54]Ibid.

[55]Guillermo Correa, "Hay guerrilleros en Chiapas desde hace ocho años; grupos radicales infiltraron a la iglesia y a las comunidades," *proceso* 880 (13 septiembre 1993): 13.

[56]Ibid.

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consideration of the possibility of an alliance indicated that at least some religious leaders were interested in finding ways to work with the Línea.[57] The conclusion of the assembly's debate is revealing. According to the Iribarren's report, "the representative assembly rejected the alliance for practical reasons; it would make the diocesan church vulnerable, converting it into a political party and restricting its identity and evangelical mission."[58] In the end the assembly decided it would have more political influence if it were not affiliated with a particular political organization. It was the idea of creating an alliance with a particular political organization that was rejected, not the involvement of the church in politics.

Members of the political organization reacted negatively to the assembly's decision. They attacked the work of the diocese and readily incorporated into their organization some catequistas and priests who did not support the church's decision. The Línea's request opened up a number of critical and volatile issues. The diocese was creating a new, untested and unpredictable process. Diocesan leadership was not able to secure the support of all the pastoral agents, with a few rejecting the new form of organization (particularly the increasing power of the catequistas), because it did not originate from episcopal authority. Others embraced the changes, but did not have the training or ability to adequately accompany the people. Some felt political alliances with opposition movements would not hurt the church, while others believed such alliances would threaten the evangelical activity of the church.

The church's preferential option for the poor, also discussed at this assembly, raised similar issues. Iribarren explains:

> . . . the majority is still living in the emotional moment of having opted for the poor but without accepting all the real obligations that go with it. The *poor* are seen as recently discovered friends; there is a natural sympathy for them. This attitude radicalizes a minority which interprets

[57]Catequistas did not attend the meetings of the representative assembly.
[58]Iribarren, 15.

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> the options in political terms of class. . . . Others look at the option with skepticism and continue their rhythm of work. There are also those who radically oppose the option, interpreting it as contrary to the universal message of the gospel.[59]

Though Iribarren acknowledges a diversity of opinions, the commitment of the diocesan leadership to a mission predicated on the acceptance of the preferential option for the poor was never in question. Rather it was determining how to act upon this commitment which troubled diocesan leadership.

The following year the assembly focused on "the ideological limits that keep us [the church] unconditionally involved in the system of exploitation."[60] The assembly began with an examination of capitalism and exploitation. This "cruel reality" facing the people of Chiapas was described as:

> . . . the presence of capitalism in Chiapas, the perverse mode of production in its imperialist phase, which extracts and exploits resources (electricity, petroleum, wood, coffee, etc.); the growing presence of the military and economic crisis and various cases of popular repression; the problem of land; the indifference and ingenuousness of many pastoral agents in the face of the campesinos' awareness of their condition of exploitation and their search for concrete forms of liberation.[61]

This is an unequivocal denunciation of capitalism as exploitative, and of those within the church who refused to acknowledge it and attempt to eradicate this exploitation.

The assembly approved the following proposal:

> It is the responsibility of the diocese to prioritize and coordinate these pastoral actions: catechism, evangelization, liturgy, sacraments, theological workshops, the formation of pastoral agents and those who aspire to be priests. But it is also its responsibility to coordinate socio-political and economic actions initiated by its members.

The more typical areas in which churches are involved, liturgy, evangelism, etc., are followed by areas of socio-political and economic actions. The latter are distinct since they are initiated by the church members. This sets them apart, and gives them a

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[59]Ibid., 16.
[60]Ibid., 18.
[61]Ibid., 19.

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different sort of legitimacy, from officially sanctioned church activities, since the members and not the church are considered the catalysts.

Among the "achievements" of this assembly the following two were cited:

1. The process of the diocese following a slow path with great demands of conversion and change of mentality, searching for solidarity with oppressed people; and
2. The position of not starting from definite ecclesial conceptions but rather discovering the identity of a church-servant of man, on the way.[62]

According to the assembly it was the diocese itself which needed to, and was in the process of, being converted. At the close of the 1970s, the diocese was searching for ways to be in solidarity with oppressed people. The notion of discovering the will of God along the way rather than starting from a definite ecclesial construct was critical. This sort of ambiguity left lots of room for the actions of the "spirit" but also for those of the "politicians" outside and inside the church.

Regardless of the persisting ambiguity, as one observer put it, "At the end of 1979 it was evident that a more markedly political pastoral action had developed. The people had woken up and it was clear that their full human development could not rest within merely a religious standard. Their lives had taken a decisive step: they chose liberty in their exodus to the selva."[63] Confrontations with the reality of the lives of their parishioners had made it necessary for church leaders to reshape the way they carried out their ministry. The church leadership recognized that certain basic criteria must be met in order to become involved in the political struggle for liberation. They would need:

1. A clear strategy, offering specific, attainable actions
2. Sufficient economic and human resources
3. An organic structure with democratic relations with the interior and the exterior

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[62]Ibid., 21.

[63]"Quiptic ta Lecubtesel," 34.

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4. Possibilities of success
5. Alliances[64]

After a great deal of reflection, the leadership concluded that the church could not meet these criteria. They admitted that the church was not in a position to lead a political movement: "the limit of its assistance would be *to help and support the emergence of the conditions necessary for a political action for the oppressed.*" [emphasis added][65]

So rather than reject a political process in which the people were already engaged, the church leadership decided to help the people assume the responsibility for their own activities. The church was beginning to find clarity regarding its role in politics by determining that which it was not. Some questioned if the church was being realistic: "How can the church be present in the concrete path of the people to illuminate, animate, sanctify without having to assume a political direction?"[66] But most were satisfied, feeling that this adequately described the relationship of the religious and the political. They contended:

> The church, for its part, by getting close to the people discovers its dynamism, better understands its work and delineates more clearly its identity. This process of revitalization, more than a realization, is a task. The path of the church is preparing for a world that aspires toward transformation, in which the community of believers has that encounter with its true place where it can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.[67]

Thus prompted by the offer of an alliance with a political organization, during this period the church adopted its role in the political life of its people as one of accompaniment. The church supported initiatives of the oppressed and helped create conditions conducive to the emergence of these initiatives.

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[64]Ibid.
[65]Ibid.
[66]Ibid.
[67]Ibid., 37.

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In the period between 1960 and 1980 the catequistas in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas left behind the traditional catechetical role of religious educator and moved to the center of the church's effort to serve the poor. The political ramifications of this work were evident in the creation of indigenous networks, the empowerment of popular organizations and the success of local development initiatives. Still the catequistas were very much under the tutelage of diocesan priests and religious. In Chapter Six, accompaniment, a religious and political tool which enabled the catequistas to come into their own, will be explored. And the inaccuracy of Philip Russell's claim that the Catholic church in Chiapas "lost influence" by the late 1970s will be demonstrated.[68]

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[68]Russell, *Chiapas Rebellion*, 34.

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CHAPTER SIX

"Organized Fanaticism": Accompaniment as Political Strategy

During the 1980s and early 1990s, four themes emerged as the church's role in the democratization process continued to come into focus: commitment, non-partisanship, faith and opposition. All four relate to the diocese's adoption of the strategy of accompaniment.

The primary struggle faced by the church was to define the notion of accompaniment. There was, by this time, consensus that accompaniment should be the pastoral strategy, yet what this meant was still vigorously debated. The issue of leadership was particularly problematic. Who is leading? Who is following? Those who are accompanying are not quite leaders but neither are they followers. Religious leaders could be found at the heart of political, social and economic struggles of the people during this time, but the religious leaders did not assume responsibility for these actions since they are simply accompanying their members on the journey. Certainly many indigenous people were organized before they encountered pastoral agents; still most religious leaders had an undeniable impact on the communities they served. In spite of, or perhaps because of, this ambiguity, accompaniment was a powerful religious and political strategy.

In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, religious accompaniment has made itself manifest in a variety of ways. For example, in the period under consideration in this chapter (1980-1990), religious leaders, clergy and lay, continually supported campesinos in their efforts to reclaim land the campesinos believed to be rightfully theirs. Religious leaders acted out of a long-term commitment of the church to the people, an attempt to stay out of partisan politics, a deep faith commitment and in spite of a developing external and internal opposition.

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One way to account for the effectiveness of accompaniment as a pastoral and political strategy is the church's unique staying power. As will be seen in the discussion below of one opposition party's foray into an indigenous community in Chiapas, the impact of opposition parties has tended to be short-lived, while the church--albeit experiencing ebbs and flows--remained. The church's long-term commitment to the communities potentially provides a relatively solid foundation from which to build community organizations.

In 1991, religious accompaniment in Chiapas took a unique turn. Responding to the arrest of a parish priest, the laity united to accompany their pastor. Thousands marched to the prison in the state's capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, where the cleric was being held, demanding his release. And thousands accompanied him on the long walk home, when he was freed. This event--the accompaniment of a clergyperson by the laity--discussed in detail below, marked the beginning of a profound shift in diocesan relations and helped chart a new path of pastoral and political participation.

The second theme to emerge during this period is the church's attempt to reconcile its theological need to remain non-partisan with its theological mandate to eradicate the oppression and injustice which many of its constituents faced on a daily basis. Given the degree to which the PRI was entrenched in all aspects of the political system, it was extremely difficult to criticize socio-political conditions in Mexico without effectively criticizing the PRI. Despite deepening involvement in the political life of its parishioners, the church continued to assert its independence from all partisan organizations.

The political prominence of faith emerged as the third theme of the 1980s and early 1990s. The power of committed belief was manifested in two distinct ways: it made possible hitherto unthinkable alliances and it exacerbated previously unnoticeable differences. The former was demonstrated in the case of Pueblo Creyente, an organization of laity which united to secure the release of an incarcerated priest. The

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latter was in evidence during the land takeover of the Finca Wololchán, when Protestants and Catholics found their theological differences being used to encourage division within the community. Whether productive or destructive, faith played a pivotal political role.

The fourth and final theme which merits the attention of those considering the events of the 1980s and early 1990s, is the increase of overt attacks on the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. In the diocese, the church had clearly identifiable leadership, participants, gathering times and locations. Certain sectors of the church were publicly identified with the cause of the poor, indigenous campesinos. These characteristics each contributed to its visibility making the church an easy target for large landholders, government officials and business interests threatened by land takeovers, and increasingly adamant calls for social, economic and political justice. This was true in the aftermath of the 1980 takeover of the Finca Wololchán and the incarceration of Father Joel Padrón in 1991. These, and other, attacks took their toll on the diocese, often causing dissension and distrust within the church. Still, a religion intimately entwined with politics is inevitably bolstered by the presence of a nemesis, and as such these attacks often strengthened the church and increased its political role.

The 1980s and early 1990s in Chiapas were marked by land disputes and takeovers. Three events were key: the Finca Wololchán conflict, the arrest of Joel Padrón and the creation of Pueblo Creyente.

Land

The distribution of land is the most contentious issue facing the people of Chiapas. Their history is riddled with ownership disputes, land invasions, petitions to the government and inadequate resources in this resource rich land. In the 1980s,

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many of these disputes increased in intensity. This was partly a symptom of mounting frustration after years of trying to work through the existing political system to gain access to much needed land, with little or no success; more importantly it was a reflection of the shifts in the economy in the late 1970s and 1980s which changed the shape of traditional indigenous communities in Chiapas.[1]

In 1976 the peso was devalued. Corn prices collapsed, forcing farmers, who had hired many indigenous migrant laborers, to cut back and use technology or convert their land to cattle pastures. The economic hardship of these changes was diluted by the conversion to coffee-picking and the initiation of a massive public works program in Chiapas and Tabasco. Still, this began to affect local communities because men who were able to secure jobs stayed away for longer periods of time and had more money when they did return. The 1982 Mexican debt crisis effectively terminated the public works program. Large numbers of people were left without jobs, and this time no alternative means of employment emerged. World coffee prices collapsed in 1989 making an already grave situation worse.

According to anthropologist Jan Rus:

> Altogether, then, migratory agricultural labor, which had employed 60,000 to 75,000 Chiapas Mayas in the early 1970s, was by the early 1990s down to perhaps as few as 40,000 to 50,000 workers. . . . Meanwhile, the population of working age men in the officially recognized population of Tzotzils, Tzeltals, Tojolabals and Ch'ols had grown from the 125,000 to 150,000 range of the mid-1970s to somewhere between 210,000 and 320,000 by 1990.[2]

This situation, Rus continues, caused a shift in native communities:

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[1]The maintenance of traditional communities was encouraged by the government, since the indigenous people were more easily controlled if they were organized in accordance with the structures put in place by their own community tradition. If the state was able to coopt a few key community leaders then the entire community could be manipulated.

[2]Jan Rus, "The Whole World Has Changed: The Reordering of Native Society in Highland Chiapas, 1974-1994," (Mexico City: IX Conference of Mexican and North American Historians, 28 October 1994), 12, photocopied.

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> When most highland men were still migrant laborers, economic divisions within communities, although certainly present and important, were muted. Solidarity was forged out of a sense, however stylized, of shared poverty and suffering. Under the new conditions of the 1980s, however, those who had capital began openly to treat communal land as simply another commodity. Those who had few resources, on the other hand, as they began to lose their toe-hold in their communities, not only became the individuals most likely to emigrate, but also those most likely to join Protestant and other dissident movements and denounce the iniquity of their communities' wealthier members and caciques.[3]

The catequistas, as detailed in Chapter Four, were often an important guiding presence in the new communities. In some cases, people who left their villages joined together to buy land with the assistance of the Catholic church. It was in these communities--committed to maintaining their Indian identity while making a fresh start --that democratic life was being built. According to Rus, "Such colonias are highly organized. Typically, regular religious services segue into asambleas where decisions are made about community affairs. . . ."[4] Just as happened in the Cañadas in the 1970s, ethnic barriers were broken down and community structures were profoundly reshaped by these developments:

> As time has gone on, ethnicity--and a pan-Mayan ethnicity at that--seems even to have become a basis of higher levels of organization and opposition to the state . . . because the new colonias are voluntary, consciously chosen communities, decision-making within groups is typically consensual, democratic, and characterized by open meetings. . . . In this sense, all of native Chiapas has become an experiment in political organization and community building over the last twenty years. By this time, every traditional community has former members who live in all of the new kinds of communities, with the result that there is probably not a family in the Highlands that does not have brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, who participate in each of the new kinds of organizations. All of these people are in contact, visiting each other, talking, weighing strategies and alternatives. The result is a new kind and degree of mobilization that have yet to be fathomed.[5]

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[3]Ibid., 14.
[4]Ibid., 15.
[5]Ibid., 17.

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> . . . it seems likely that the more open, democratic nature of the new communities is likely eventually to flow back and change the social structures of the traditional communities as well.[6]

During the 1970s and 1980s, a time of economic hardship and revitalization of community life, a number of political parties and organizations organized people in the diocese, encouraging more radical actions. These groups included the Independent Confederation of Agricultural Workers and Peasants (CIOAC) which organized ranch laborers, the Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization (OCEZ) which addressed needs for land reform, Popular Politics, the Maoist student organization from Mexico City (discussed in Chapter Five), and the Socialist Workers Party (PST) which pursued the ambitious goal of becoming a national opposition party.[7] Officially, the church kept its distance from these groups.

The church, in turn, taught catechetical courses examining the theme of "the land," providing a theological context and rationale for responding to what religious and political leaders alike had identified as a vastly unequal distribution of this coveted resource. Some priests and religious studied the political rights guaranteed by the Constitution and helped campesinos file land claims and defend their rights. The church also provided a vehicle for communication. For example, after a particularly devastating exchange on the Finca Wololchán, (described below) the Jesuit priests in the area issued an extensive--and essentially the only--press release detailing these events. The way in which the Jesuits worked with the people involved in this tragedy is a poignant example of religious accompaniment.

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[6]Ibid., 18.
[7]Collier, 69-70.

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Finca Wololchán, 1980[8]

In 1961 legal land claims were made on the Finca Wololchán located in the municipio of Sitalá, an area inhabited mostly by Tzeltal and Ch'ol Indians. Under the law, this and the adjacent fincas were susceptible to these claims. But, according to the Jesuits, the Agrarian Reform Secretariat deliberately prolonged the settlement of the claims in order to protect the large landholders. In 1974 the municipal president of Sitalá, based upon false testimony regarding sixty of the ninety applicants, awarded land to the remaining thirty. This action intentionally, and irreparably, divided the group and diminished its ability to assert its claims.[9]

In 1976 the PST entered the area. Initially, party leaders intended to address the issue of land. Having proved too difficult, this effort was abandoned in favor of an attempt to help unionize the coffee producers, but this too was forsaken when efforts to secure good prices were not successful. The PST then tried to influence the municipal elections of Chilón, Yajalón and Sitalá and, except in the municipal centers, was unsuccessful. In spite of its weakness, the party continued expanding little by little into the region. During the time that the PST was faltering, according to an account in a diocesan journal, "the people did not sleep." A couple of campesinos gathered people together to talk about their common problems. This group had no name or by-laws; it was simply known by the people as their "organization." Some PST members participated in these meetings.

In the first few months of 1980 the PST launched a national campaign of land invasions to confront the campesino agrarian problem and promote the electoral component of the party.[10] As part of the national campaign, party members based in Sitalá proposed an invasion of the Finca Wololchán. Their proposal was timely since

[8]The name of this finca is also spelled Golonchan and Bolonchan; however Wololchán is the most common spelling.

[9]Documentos de Información Católica, "Boletín de Prensa de la Misión de Bachajón" (Oaxaca: Documentos de Información Católica, 24 junio 1980), 5.

[10]María David, "Vivo en nuestra memoria (Wololchán)," *Caminante* 39 (junio-julio 1985): 54.

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the campesinos' organization was strong and many of them had become frustrated by waiting almost twenty years to have land claims satisfied by the legal system. The PST convinced the campesinos the only way to secure their land was through invasion.[11] The socialist party still did not have much of a base in the communities, but the enthusiasm with which its proposal was received increased its strength in the area. The local people willingly supplied the organizational foundation which the PST lacked. One observer noted:

> . . . [the campesinos] felt empowered and more; they saw themselves supporting a party of national dimensions . . . which had force in the country. Because of the weakness of the local party, the people took on the task of implementing the invasion.[12]

The incentive of connecting to a national campaign had been sufficient to overcome the campesinos' hesitations of linking their organization with the obviously feeble local PST affiliate.

The invasions began in April. Rumors circulated among the small property holders that those without a PRI credential would not be protected by the government or allowed to sell corn. The threats were effective and most small property owners aligned themselves with the PRI.[13] Religion entered into the scenario when a number of Protestants who were also small property holders aligned themselves with the PRI. A diocesan publication reports:

> The Protestant brothers, many of whom were small property owners, believed everything that was happening was the work of the devil. . . . they did not see a Christ who comes to bring fire to the land and to turn sons against parents. These ideas caused them to align themselves with the PRI. This party is then formed by the traditional oppressors, by

[11]"Camino de Wololchán," *Caminante* 27 (marzo 1981): 15.

[12]Ibid., 16.

[13]One observer noted: "There was no lack of 'smooth operators' who in the middle of the confusion knew how to 'carry water to their mills.' PRI credentials were sold as security for life, property and food. From many people money was taken . . . $500 per person and $1,000 if they were prediáconos. This forced collection of money was supported by the Protestant brothers." Ibid., 17.

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> Protestants and small property holders who have withdrawn from the popular organization.[14]

Having not fully understood the message of Christ, the Protestants (this Catholic publication asserts) sided with the PRI. For their part, the Protestants' theological interpretation of the events convinced them that their position--and incidentally that of the PRI--was the righteous position. Many Catholics, in turn, concluded that the PRI, comprised of small property owners and Protestants, was the oppressor.

The landholders responded to the campesinos' initiatives by launching a publicity campaign blaming the invasions on the PST and identifying the clergy as allies of the party and "direct instigators of the problem."[15] On the one hand this is ironic, given the tension which existed between the church and political organizations; on the other, the church's obviously unpropitious attitude toward the PRI lent at least some credibility to the claim. Catholic lay people had worked with the PST and in the process had become more militant. "This," an observer from the church explains, "is how confusion is born. The need for land and the demand that it be taken back from those who have it illegally was always at the heart [of the struggle], but with all these twists soon the movement was made to appear as a religious struggle and a struggle among the parties."[16]

The church was not officially involved in organizing the land takeovers at the Finca Wololchán, but since many of the participants, as well as those affected, were deeply religious people, their religious commitments were easily exploited. When one is battling the devil, what act can be considered too extreme or too dangerous? Although it was not responsible for the campaign, the church was a strong, visible presence in the lives of the campesinos. Thus it was an easy target of the property owners' wrath. Some went so far as to make death threats to certain Catholic priests.

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[14]Ibid., 16.
[15]Documentos de Información Católica, "Boletín," 6.
[16]"Camino de Wololchán," 16.

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The church did become officially involved when these events took a tragic turn. On May 30th the landholders of the Finca Wololchán forcefully evicted the campesino invaders, killing one person and wounding three others. Using what observers considered a tactic of psychological warfare, the municipal president of the neighboring town of Yajalón spread word that forty-six people had been killed and seventy wounded in the events of May 30th.[17] His exaggerated account heightened tensions. A meeting was scheduled by the PST in Yajalón on June 1st. According to eye witness Vincente Ruiz, the inhabitants of Wololchán set out to attend this meeting but found police blocking the road. The police, speaking in Spanish, told the campesinos they could not pass. Some of the women, who spoke only Tzeltal, continued to advance. The police used tear gas and then fired their rifles. A woman and child were killed on the spot and in the end six people died.[18]

The next day, Father Mardonio Morales, a Jesuit from the Mission of Bachajón, who had worked with area catequistas to prepare for the 1974 Indigenous Congress and more recently had helped the Tzeltal people of the area to prepare legal land claims (and the interviewee in the 1993 *proceso* article about the PP), met with the governor of Chiapas. The governor, eager to rid himself of this problem, went to Wololchán and offered all ninety campesino families land in the Marques de Comillas (a distant area of the forest on the Guatemalan border). Unwilling to leave their home land, the campesinos rejected this proposal and remained on the land.[19] Then, on Sunday afternoon, June 15th, a large contingent of soldiers arrived at the Finca Wololchán. Using tear gas followed by other weapons, they killed fifteen people and wounded innumerable others as they violently removed 723 people from the land.[20] One observer recalls:

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[17]Documentos de Información Católica, "Boletín," 6.
[18]David, 55.
[19]David, 57.
[20]Documentos de Información Catolica, "Boletín," 6. See also David, 54.

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> . . . many of the campesinos took refuge in the colonia Tacuba, of the municipio of Chilón. On the following day, they sent six women to the place of the actions; they saw that there were twelve dead, but they were not allowed to pass. The dead were tossed away and the dogs and the buzzards were eating them. The soldiers would not let them gather the dead bodies. . . . The repression of Golonchán without any doubt was trying to make the campesinos see that private property must not be affected, and to struggle for land is an activity that carries bloody consequences.[21]

In the end the comandante of the 31st military zone, General Absalon Castellanos Dominguez (future governor of the state), declared that two people had died in the confrontation. The state press did not carry the story. Later the government offered to sell the land to the campesinos if they would agree to join the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), the government affiliated campesino organization.[22]

Following the tragedy, the church used its networks to communicate the events in Wololchán to a stunned public. The Jesuits explained that their press release was necessary because no information had been made public regarding the actions of the army on June 15, 1980.

> . . . we speak because the desperate situation of the seven hundred people who were affected demands solidarity and clamors for justice. Even though no one asked us, even when all were quiet, we must lift up our voice. This is the commitment that the church reaffirms by way of its bishops in the meeting of the CELAM in Puebla in 1979. . . .[23]

The bishops of the south pacific region of Mexico, which includes Chiapas, also felt compelled to speak out after the events in Wololchán. In their statement they denounced the tendency to protest human rights violations in other countries while ignoring violations at home. Acknowledging the religious component of the conflict, the bishops explained, "As Christians we deplore that our brothers in the faith commit

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[21]Muñoz y de Jesus, 70.
[22]"Chiapas en la coyuntura," 30.
[23]Documentos de Información Catolica, "Boletín," 5.

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injustice looking egotistically at their economic or political interests." And they called for an "end to the slander and deliberately false rumors. . . ."[24]

They addressed the political actors in the conflict:

> To the distinct parties and political movements we ask for honesty in the offers, true information to your members, and real promotion of participation in the decisions, so your affiliates may grow and mature and channel their efforts toward the construction of a better Mexico. In this way, you will neither excite violence nor involve them in conflicts which will prove bloody.

the religious workers:

> To the pastoral agents we invite you to not be discouraged in the face of the distortions and risks; carry with you the announcement of the Good News to the poor, and from them, to all the rest. Historical moments like this help to define concretely the Christian sentiment of our accompaniment of the oppressed and the illuminating function which we owe to the community.

and finally the campesinos:

> To the particular campesinos we exhort that with the infinite patience which historically you have demonstrated, you do not abandon the legal and peaceful paths in the search for justice.[25]

In the aftermath of the events of the Finca Wololchán, the religious leaders continued their commitment to accompany the people of the diocese. The church worked with the people to rebuild their communities. Sixteen years after the Wololchán tragedy, the political party which instigated the takeover is long gone. Yet, the church remains a vital part of the community. During the 1994 presidential/ gubernatorial election (discussed in Chapter Seven), the Jesuits trained four hundred indigenous electoral observers in the Wololchán area.

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[24] "Comunicado a la opinión pública con motivo de los sucesos acaecidos en Wololchán, Chiapas," *Caminante* 26 (agosto 1980): 20.

[25] Ibid., 21.

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Tensions in the Church

In the 1982 diocesan assembly it was evident that the church was still trying to resolve its relationship with political parties and Protestants. During this assembly pastoral teams, analyzing the work of the diocese, concluded that the people faced a variety of obstacles when they tried to organize, including the divisions introduced by the political parties and the different Protestant sects. The pastoral teams felt that the presence of political parties and Protestants actually impeded the organizational work of the diocese.

The church's attitude, particularly regarding the parties, could arguably have had the effect of hindering, rather than enhancing, efforts to democratize Chiapas. Some in the church felt that a diverse array of political parties and religious organizations represented disunity and was counterproductive.[26]

Still, the church realized that if it was to play a role in the democratization process it must also address its own structures and organization. The assembly set out "to consolidate the process of popular liberation" which was considered the guiding principle of the diocese. The decision "to consolidate" the process implied that the process was well under way, and thus ripe for consolidation. However, the challenges still to be addressed, spelled out at the conclusion of this assembly, demonstrate that real clarity continued to allude the group. The first challenge was to determine, "what is liberation?" The assembly's other challenges included:

> . . . the challenge of looking for structures in which dominating power would be substituted by power of service and in which the faithful people participate in the decision-making. . . .

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[26]Bryan Froehle's study on religious competition and democracy in Venezuela contradicts the assertion of the pastoral workers in Chiapas. Froehle found that competition actually encouraged more vibrant organizations rather than diffusing political and religious energy as the pastoral workers implied. See Bryan Froehle, "Religious Competition, Community Building, and Democracy in Latin America: Grassroots Religious Organizations in Venezuela," in *Religion and Democracy in Latin America*, ed. William H. Swatos, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

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> . . . the major challenge of achieving real participation of the poor people in the decisions of their church, without being a game of manipulating forces, but rather an outline of what a fraternal and participatory society must be.[27]

These "challenges" reflected the diocese's continued efforts to define accompaniment in concrete terms. Thus the challenge of creating an organizational framework which encouraged power-sharing and widespread participation and modeled a new type of society, was identified, if still unresolved.

These efforts continued at the January 1984 assembly. With a theme of ecclesial clarification, the goal of the assembly was stated as follows: "To gain team and diocesan cohesion in a climate of prayer, discernment, dialogue and fellowship which reconciles us and our efforts to confront the challenges and advance toward the diocesan plan."[28] Iribarren notes:

> This objective echoes the weariness of many pastoral agents, the disillusion of some, the distance between equipos to the inside; it is the fruit of the tension which has been lived with during the year because of the real threats against people and the diocesan process.[29]

The situation between the indigenous campesinos and large landholders and entrepreneurs continued to be volatile during this time. As in the case of the Finca Wololchán, religious leaders were frequently targeted by the landholders and business people, for reprisals. Though supporters of the church often rallied on its behalf, the toll taken on the morale and will of religious leaders by those threats and attacks was reflected during the 1984 assembly.

During his opening statement Bishop Ruiz referred to the text of Psalm 133, "How good it is when brothers live together in peace. . . ." He discussed the necessity for those in the diocese to live together in peace. He talked about how the diocesan

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[27]Iribarren, 31.
[28]Ibid., 43.
[29]Ibid.

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commitment to and identification with the campesinos had caused the very conflicted context in which the diocese had been existing for a number of years. Ruiz explained:

> Now I believe that all have assumed--as a necessary part of our option [for the poor]--conflict;[30] but we discover it, not as such a negative consequence but better as a condition without which our path cannot be illuminated.[31]

Ruiz argued that conflict was a necessary component of progress. Frequently being the object of attack served, in some ways, to delineate clearly those who were "with" the church and those who were not. Having a readily identifiable "enemy," both sides were often reduced to simplistic tactics and strategies. In other words, confrontation helped clarify the direction of the diocese. For critics of the church, statements like Ruiz's confirmed their belief that the church was inciting violence and instability in society.

Manuel Mejido, a columnist for *El Universal* (a Mexican newspaper with national distribution), wrote two columns in November 1980 denouncing the bishop and the Catholic church in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The first was headlined, "a

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[30]In 1982 the Marist Brothers who directed La Casa Misión de Guadalupe in Comitán were awakened at 2 a.m. by twenty armed men. Destroying much of their house and removing materials from the library, taking tape recorders, microphones, projectors, documentation and money, these men searched for arms they believed the Brothers were hiding. Over the next few months the Brothers were subjected to intense, sometimes physically violent, harassment; their mission apparently singled out because of its key position in the catequista network.

Also attacks against the campesinos increased. There were many deaths and wounded, and many were expelled from their land (Flores Magon, Simojovel, Bachajón and Tila are mentioned by name). At times it was not the government carrying out these actions but rather the private guards of the large landholders or members of the official unions. Also the Guatemalan refugees were threatened.

There was a general attempt to discredit the diocese which was accused of "stirring up the indigenous campesinos against the patron and the government, of arming opposition groups, of protecting and arming Guatemalan guerrilla groups; all this was framed by the accusation that everyone from the Bishop to the religious to the catequistas was communist." "Boletín informativo," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 1 marzo 1982). Photocopied.

In 1987, the Asociación Municipal de la Pequeña Propiedad y Asociación Ganadera Local de Ocosingo, Chiapas wrote an open letter to then-President Miguel de la Madrid demanding the removal of Bishop Ruiz. Citing recent campesino land invasions, the letter demands, "We do not want more, but we do not want less than the immediate ceasing of the invasions of our property . . . and the expulsion from Chiapas the bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Dr. Samuel Ruiz Garcia, principle inventor of the climate of agitation, disorder and violence which prevails in our property. . . ." "Carta abierta al Sr. Presidente Miguel de La Madrid," *Excelsior* 25 septiembre 1987, 32(A).

[31]Iribarren, 43.

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subversive bishop preaches violence, already the blood is running," and the second likened the work of the church to "organized fanaticism." In the first article Mejido recounts what he believed was a dangerous situation in southeast Mexico:

> San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chis. is being converted into an international subversive center, led by the bishop of this diocese, Dr. Samuel Ruiz García, who with the help of various priests--mainly foreigners--is taking advantage of the fertile ground, which the indigenous of the southeast of Mexico represent, to sow the insidious act, the difference of classes and anti-nationalism.[32]

He goes on to explain that Ruiz uses his high ecclesiastical position to "incite violence. converting himself into a danger for the peace of Chiapas and even for those neighboring countries of our southern border." Mejido provides his readers with a vivid portrait of the priests and the worship services in the diocese:

> It is common in San Cristóbal de Las Casas and other communities of the lacandon zone to see so-called priests with long disheveled hair, long beards, dirty clothes, and bad smelling--obviously without cassocks--preaching to the nucleus of the population, not the Gospel, but the incitement of violence and social disorder, inciting rebellion against authorities and the invasion of lands.
>
> In the sermons of the bishop and his priest-followers phrases such as "Beloved brothers all these lands were of your ancestors and to reclaim them is not to rob. A Spaniard took them from you centuries ago. Go for them. If it is necessary to kill, kill to get back that which is yours" are heard.[33]

Finally Mejido notes the scarcity of priests and the growing reliance on the catequistas to fulfill religious functions:

> . . . Bishop Ruiz García has not ordained more than four priests, and many that were there have asked for a change; he supplements the scarcity with priests of other dioceses or with foreigners. Moreover, he

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[32]Manuel Mejido, "Alto poder: un obispo subversivo, predica de violencia, ya corrió la sangre," *El Universal,* 18 Noviembre 1980, 1.

[33]Ibid., 1 and 18.

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> has prepared "unpredictable catequistas" to receive confession and distribute communion.[34]

In the second article Mejido points to the presence of the Evangelicals (Protestants) as a possible foil to the bishop's subversive tactics:

> To maintain the hegemony of dominance over the indigenous of the sierra chiapaneca, the bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Samuel Ortiz [*sic*] García, has unleashed "a religious war"--organized groups of fanatic Catholics who are used to persecute evangelicals or those who do not accept his subversive ideas.
>
> The tactic, employed by Bishop Ortiz García [*sic*] to incite the indigenous to attack the mestizos, invade their lands and rob their belongings, has not always succeeded because groups of evangelicals also have worked many years in the sierra converting the indigenous to their religion which inculcates precepts of the Bible: teaching them to read first, eradicating alcoholism, teaching them to respect their neighbor and other moral precepts. This has been a barrier of protection when the foreign priests arrive sent by the bishop not to catequize but to incite revolt.[35]

In conclusion Mejido calls for the church to disentangle itself from politics as. he points out. is required by the Constitution:

> There is still time to avoid more bloodshed and attacks against private property. It is time to respect the Constitution and oblige those representatives of the church to exercise their mission inside their temples, and take their hands out of politics and that which is not exclusively related to their religion.[36]

The church had become one of the primary targets of many who observed the tension building within Chiapas. This was due in part to its high visibility but also could be attributed to the burgeoning of the catequista network throughout the diocese. Catequistas, encouraged by their progressive bishop and clergy, had made organizational inroads in numerous communities which often bolstered claims for more just land distribution, education, health care, etc. Those in power were threatened by

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[34] Ibid., 18.

[35] Manuel Mejido, "Alto poder: fanatismo organizado," *El Universal*, 21 Noviembre 1980, 1 and 18.

[36] Mejido, "Alto poder: un obispo subversivo," 18.

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the catequistas' growing strength. In the early 1990s, the church, embodied by a parish priest, sustained its most overt attack to date. The laity responded in force.

The Formation of Pueblo Creyente and the Arrest of Father Joel Padrón

The Formation of Pueblo Creyente

Recognizing the church of the poor was the theme of the 1990 diocesan assembly. The task at hand was "the creation of spaces for mobilization, articulation and defense of the people."[37] Bishop Ruiz's opening address to the assembly embodied the optimism and the challenge before the church:

> . . . we all know that on this occasion we are living something new in our diocese . . . that the yearnings expressed on various occasions to create a connection between our assembly and poor people--the base which gives the hierarchy and pastoral agents their reason for being--is now beginning to be implemented. [The poor] will now give their insights in this assembly. In this way testing our conviction that the poor evangelize us. . . .[38]

The assembly had reflected for a number of years on its own ideas about how to be a church which opts for the poor, but now it was trying to understand how the poor themselves perceived the church's role and more importantly how the poor could evangelize, or minister to, the clergy. With this goal in mind, representatives from more than thirty communities had talked together for three days. Of these, a group of sixteen delegates was chosen to share its thoughts with the assembly. These campesinos discussed their struggles for land, fair coffee prices, just salaries and the ability to organize. One participant described attempts to work toward unity within the community:

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[37]Onésimo Hidalgo, Salvador Reyes, Victoria Espejo, "Analisis del caso: Padre Joel Padrón," *Encuentros* 5 (noviembre-diciembre 1991): 24.

[38]David, 5.

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> We struggle to gain more of the people's confidence, to put in common the little that we have, to not divide ourselves. . . . Everything is done to divide. The government puts in the parties to divide; the Protestant sects divide. . . . Nevertheless, the people grow and become stronger.[39]

Father Carlos Bravo, S.J., attended this assembly as an observer. Father Bravo believed the future of the church could be found in the process underway at this assembly. Convinced that the search for democracy was a vital task of the church, Bravo believed this commitment to lay ministry was a critical step. According to Bravo, the face of the church was being redrawn to include not only the faces (and voices) of the poor but an empowered laity as well.[40] After the assembly some of the campesino delegates returned to their communities and formed the organization known as Pueblo Creyente.

The Arrest of Father Joel Padrón

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the campesinos conducted a series of land takeovers in Chiapas, similar to the one in Wololchán. Their efforts met with varying degrees of success, but landholders became angry and frustrated by the takeovers. As in Wololchán, the Catholic church was often the primary target of their frustration, and relations between the government, the large landholders and the church grew increasingly tense. On July 22, 1990, Father Marcelo Rotsaert, who served the community of Soyatitlán, was detained by government officials. He was interrogated by the judicial police and "accused of being the intellectual author of the land takeovers and of having incited Guatemalan refugees to join guerrilla movements." Soon after this, the Secretary of Government expelled Father Rotsaert from Mexico, sending him

[39]Ibid., 7.
[40]Ibid., 9.

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back to his home country of Belgium.[41] The following year, Father Joel Padrón was deemed responsible for another land takeover.

Joel Padrón had grown up in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato. The youngest boy of five children, he was the son of a migrant worker. As a child he served as an acolyte in his local parish where one of the priests liked him and secured a scholarship for Padrón to attend seminary in León. After his ordination he went to Rome for a year to study cannon law. Upon returning to Mexico, he chose to work in Chiapas, a state infamous for its lack of justice.[42] Father Padrón initially served a parish in Comitán. In 1980, he was sent to Simojovel, an area populated mostly by Tzotzil and Zoque Indians and known for its high intensity of violence, assassinations, repression, the presence of guards hired by large landholders, and the growth of strong independent campesino organizations whose principal demand was the redistribution of land.

Before Padrón arrived, the area priest never traveled to the outlying communities. Padrón's interest in accompaniment of the poor led him to visit and become a familiar figure in many of the area's indigenous communities and to challenge some long-standing traditions. Some of his wealthier parishioners did not welcome these new pastoral initiatives, and criticized his efforts as exceeding the proper boundaries of religious work. But Padrón emphasized, "I have never denied service to any of the rich. . . . In the church we read the gospel. From there we take examples like the curing of the lame or the sharing of bread. . . . The church cannot make the jump to social change. It only can conscientize and strengthen unity."[43] In 1989 Father Padrón did not choose a wealthy person to take charge of the community's annual fiesta of San Antonio as had been the custom. This loss of control or threat to

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[41] Carlos Fazio, *Samuel Ruiz: El Caminante* (México D.F.: Espasa Calpe, 1994), 170.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Wim Gijsbers, "Simojovel," *Ojarasca* 33-34 (junio-julio 1994): 24.

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the status quo was considered by some observers to at least partially account for Padrón's having been singled out for arrest.[44]

On September 12, 1991, forty members of CIOAC, armed with machetes, violently evicted a number of families from an area known as San José. The land in question was fifteen by seventy meters. Those involved in the takeover allegedly did more than three thousand dollars worth of damage to the property. The victims pointed to Father Padrón claiming he was the leader of the group.[45] Six days later, on September 18, at two in the afternoon, without an order of apprehension, the judicial police arrested Father Joel Padrón. At 5:30 p.m. he was permitted to call the curia from his maximum security cell in the Cerro Hueco Prison in Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

Describing his arrest Padrón recalls:

> Eight agents with pistols in their hands came to detain me. In addition they had fifteen heavy arms in the truck to frighten the people. But the people responded in their own way and opened up the church. Five hundred to a thousand people kept a vigil in the church sharing their beans and tortillas, without responding to the continuous provocations of the police and later, to top it off, they organized a pilgrimage to Tuxtla Gutiérrez. They went to the sanctuary of Guadalupe carrying the images of the saints, passing by the prison. All fully in order, with some yelling, yes, but no violence. The government did not know what to do.[46]

Father Padrón's charges included robbery, conspiracy, unlawful association, and possession of firearms. The governor's official spokesman accused Padrón of being a "guerrilla priest, promoter of subversive acts, a spokesman of ideological extremism in a cassock."[47]

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[44]Ibid.

[45]But it soon became evident that this charge had been fabricated since the two accusers were disgruntled campesino organizers who had aligned themselves with the PRI and the CNC. Fazio, 171-172.

[46]Gijsbers, 24.

[47]Fazio, 171.

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Bishop Ruiz asserted that Father Padrón's detention was linked to a publication of the diocese's Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center (CDHFBC). Human rights violations had been an issue in Chiapas for centuries, but as the violations became more systematic, diocesan consciousness increased.[48] In March 1989, the human rights center was founded in the diocese. In a publication released just prior to the arrest of Father Padrón, the CDHFBC cited the governor of Chiapas, José Patrocinio González Garrido, as the "intellectual author" of various assassinations, acts of torture, evictions, delays in judicial process, physical attacks and ecological threats which claimed the indigenous people of Chiapas as victims.[49] Previously Garrido and Ruiz had clashed on many occasions. This time Ruiz believed Garrido had used Padrón's arrest to retaliate for the scathing accusations published by the human rights center.

While Father Padrón was in prison he communicated via letters. His letter of October 10, 1991, cites Lucas Gavilan's words, "do not lose time looking for ways to defend yourself; your best defense is your cause." To this Padrón adds:

> . . . my cause is the justice of the indigenous people. This is my defense. . . . I do not have, nor cannot have a preference for one political party because I am convinced that none of the present political parties can respond to the demands of the indigenous people. The Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God, the Bible is sufficient for me. . . . The theology of liberation is not, and cannot be, a current that puts in danger the social stability of the state. It is the misery of the indigenous people without solution for generations, their prostration, their endemic sickness, their illiteracy, their malnutrition (this is my true fault for which I beg pardon from my indigenous brothers: that in more than ten years I have done nothing, or very little, to help lift them up from their prostration).[50]

Padrón voiced a perspective commonly heard from the church in this diocese: it was impossible for him (or the church) to favor a particular political party, because none of

[48]Ibid., 168.
[49]Ibid., 171.
[50]Hidalgo, 8.

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them was able to serve the people adequately. Instead the Bible was enough. This sentiment bears striking similarity, and thus raises the same concerns, to that expressed by the pastoral agents in their 1982 assembly.

Padrón explained that never in his tenure had his religious accompaniment meant joining a group of indigenous people in an action against the government. "I never did this," he said, "nor did they need me for this."[51] In another letter Padrón was more explicit about the role of outsiders in the indigenous struggle:

> . . . [The indigenous] do not need advisors from outside. They are not hungry because I tell them they are hungry. They are not sick because I tell them they are sick. They are not illiterate because I tell them they are illiterate. . . . The indigenous person lives malnourished, hungry for generations; this is his reality and he is not going to rise up because someone from the outside tells him to rise up; it is his own desperate reality that brings him to his feet.[52]

Father Padrón's words are literally true. However, the role of the church in helping campesinos understand why they are hungry, sick, illiterate, malnourished or landless and what might be done about this is difficult to dismiss. The church has provided a theological rationale which could be converted into political activity or in other words, "bring the campesino to his feet."

The governor offered to make a deal with Padrón. After extensive negotiations with the diocese, the government suggested the following conditions for Padrón's freedom:

1. A diocesan pronouncement that there are no human rights violations in Chiapas
2. A condemnation of the land takeovers and a statement of respect for small properties
3. The eviction of campesinos from twelve pieces of land taken by CIOAC and OCEZ, in the municipios of Simojovel, Ocosingo and Motozintla

[51]Ibid., 9.
[52]Ibid., 10.

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4. The catequistas, diaconos, prediaconos, and pastoral agents stop inciting land takeovers
5. Father Joel leave the state if he is liberated[53]

These demands illustrate the government's perception of the church's role in the socio-political life of Chiapas, demonstrating that the government assumes the church had substantial social and political influence. The detention of Father Padrón was linked to the agrarian conflicts. Diocesan observers interpreted Padrón's detention as a political act: Padrón was "a hostage and not a common prisoner. . . ." The diocese did not accept the government's conditions, since they felt they had no authority over many of these issues.[54] One observer puts it this way:

> Morally, it was a typical case of mocking justice to justify the unjust; a mockery of rights. To make matters worse, they tried to blackmail the bishop of San Cristóbal. They virtually demanded that he keep silent and comply passively with the agrarian injustices and the indigenous genocide in this zone.[55]

In the end, Ruiz determined that there was no point in trying to dialogue with the governor since the governor was imposing impossible conditions. Ruiz set up meetings with the Secretary of Government and the president of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), thereby elevating the incident to a federal level. The Apostolic Delegation in Mexico and the Mexican Episcopal Conference publicly expressed their support for the work of the Diocese of San Cristóbal and called for Father Padrón's immediate release.

The response of the laity to Padrón's arrest was extraordinary. Much to the surprise of the church hierarchy, the leadership of the laity was pivotal to Padrón's release. Pueblo Creyente, indigenous campesinos and poor mestizos--most members of various campesino organizations--joined together *as a people of faith* to work for the release of Father Padrón. In the middle of October they began a 123 kilometer

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[53]Ibid., 17.
[54]Ibid., 17 and 18.
[55]Fazio, 173.

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pilgrimage to Tuxtla Gutiérrez where Padrón was being held. It began with five hundred indigenous Catholics, but as the march passed through various villages along the way, many people joined. The group arrived in Tuxtla eighteen thousand strong. Never before had there been a march of this size. Also throughout the region more than fifty thousand people participated in acts of support for Padrón.[56] This large scale mobilization was an important and powerful demonstration of Pueblo Creyente's capacity to impact the political arena.

The pilgrimage, which the participants considered a physical act of prayer petitioning for the liberation of Father Padrón, disturbed state and federal officials. They implored Bishop Ruiz to intercede and stop the march. Ruiz spoke with the laity about the government officials' concerns, but Pueblo Creyente explained they would march anyway because they wanted "to lift up a prayer so it can be seen that we are sad. . . ." This exchange indicated the shifting relationship between the indigenous people and the church. Prior to Padrón's detention, the indigenous Catholics had generally accepted the bishop's will regarding political initiatives. This time, the indigenous lay leaders of Pueblo Creyente had charted the course and the bishop knew he was powerless to alter it. Ruiz returned to the government officials and explained he was only a servant of the people whose "suffering and indignation" were so great he could not hope to halt their march.[57]

One of the most compelling aspects of this action was the coalescing of people, from a wide variety of organizations, with one key common characteristic: their faith. According to one observer, "the thousands and thousands of indigenous, campesinos and poor mestizos, even though many of them were based in distinct organizations, their FAITH in the Word of God made flesh was their cause of commitment in the middle of a reality of acute misery."[58] In this case, faith enabled members of a vast

[56]Hidalgo, 26.
[57]Fazio, 174.
[58]Hidalgo, 25.

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array of organizations to transcend their differences and work together toward a common goal.

When the eighteen thousand marchers arrived in the capital, the governor claimed the matter was out of his hands since the bishop had discussed the situation with the federal officials; the federal government must decide the outcome of the case.[59] The people stayed three days, until they were satisfied that the case was taking its legal course, pledging to return if this did not happen.

The campaign for Father Padrón's release spanned diocesan, state, national and international boundaries. Human rights groups from around the world participated. Other governments became involved. On October 10, 1991, the United States government requested information on Padrón's case. The U.S. letter was made public in Mexico on October 23; the Mexican government did not reply for ninety days. On October 29 a group of twenty priests, pastoral agents, laity (including two representatives from the Tzotzil community in Simojovel), all from Chiapas, traveled to the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City. There Bishop Ruiz and the Archbishop Miguel Perez Gil celebrated a mass in which over fifty priests participated. Father Manuel Velázquez, representing more than three hundred Mexican Catholic clergy, spoke about Padrón's arrest and incarceration. A letter of solidarity with Father Padrón, from twenty-nine Methodist and Catholic bishops, was read.[60]

Late on the night of November 6, Father Padrón was released. Padrón said, "I never lost hope that justice was going to shine in the middle of the night."[61] Over eight thousand people accompanied Padrón on his journey back to Simojovel. In a significant twist for the strategy of accompaniment, the laity accompanied a member of the clergy when he was in need.

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[59]Fazio, 175.
[60]Ibid., 179.
[61]Ibid., 180.

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The arrest of Father Joel Padrón illustrates the political significance others assigned to the work of the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Onésimo Hidalgo explains:

> The detention and incarceration of Father Joel Padrón González constitutes repression of the campesino movement. It is also an aggression--with the intention of disarticulation--against the pastoral line of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The pastoral line is made up of:
> --the diocesan accompaniment of the legitimate popular movement;
> --their constant denunciations of the frequent violations of human rights in the state;
> --their power of being listened to with such national and international repercussions.[62]

Hidalgo connects the pastoral work of the diocese and the campesino movement. In his opinion, an attack on the former is an attack on the latter. In some ways, as has been noted, the diocese is a much more visible, or tangible, target than the somewhat amorphous "campesino movement." The diocese is also perceived to be a defender of the popular movement and critic of human rights violations.

Certainly the diocese has made critical contributions to the political process but in the Fall of 1991 it became evident that the laity, often overlooked by observers inside and outside the church, were a vital part of the leadership of the diocese and their political and religious influence was increasing. In an interview following the incident, Ruiz was asked if the release of Father Padrón represented a victory for the diocese. Ruiz replied, it was "a victory for the indigenous, popular mobilization." He went on to describe this time as a moment of "consciousness raising for the diocese, a very strong internal clarification." He noted the presence of national and international solidarity, but highlighted the contribution of the Pueblo Creyente as having made the fundamental difference.[63] Since Pueblo Creyente was a fledgling organization when

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[62]Hidalgo, 28.
[63]Fazio, 183.

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Father Padrón was arrested. this event inspired a tremendous growth in the organization.

Carlos Fazio compares the formation of Pueblo Creyente to the 1974 Indigenous Congress as far as its significance for the diocese. He explains:

> Its birth was another concrete, qualitative step of Samuel Ruiz, in the democratization of the diocese. But the political repercussions of this new decision were not to the liking of the Secretary of Government. The bishop of San Cristóbal . . . was proceeding to convert himself into a democratic leader of the civil society of Chiapas, in a state where a semi-feudal regime still tacitly reigned.[64]

Concerned about the bishop's growing political influence, the Mexican government contacted the apostolic delegate Girolamo Prigione, who concluded that the bishop's actions had to be interpreted as "a gesture of 'reductionism' contrary to the universality and catholicity of the church." From this point on Prigione began to build an offensive against the bishop which would reach fruition two years later, in October 1993.

For his part, the bishop recognized the political impact of the work of his diocese, heralding this as a "privileged moment, in which the evangelizing movement of the diocese is gradually generating an awakening, a raising of consciousness . . . which afterward converts into something which has a political dimension."[65] Ruiz marveled that the multitudes who had gathered to help secure the release of Father Padrón recognized that this incident was "something more than a mere episode." He acknowledged that control of Pueblo Creyente was beyond the grasp of the church hierarchy. "To define [Pueblo Creyente's] historic role toward the future is a prophetic work," Ruiz explained, "which I do not feel capable of doing."[66]

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[64]Ibid., 185.
[65]Samuel Ruíz Garcia, "El pueblo creyente," *Encuentros* 6 (enero-febrero 1992): 35.
[66]Ibid., 36.

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The formation of Pueblo Creyente caused the diocese to rethink the issue of accompaniment. The organization had far surpassed the "timid idea" of including laity in the pastoral process. Old patterns were no longer workable. Ruiz admits that, "Some say: The people, the people! but at times this people's word was to say: 'I say.' and put words in the mouths of the people."[67] And thus he wonders "how to accompany, in order to not assume, how to accompany and not subordinate, how to accompany and not discriminate." Having observed the faith of the people in action and their tremendous capacity to use their faith to address their responsibility to participate in a political context, Ruiz's appreciation of the laity increased enormously.[68] Hopeful that the emergence of Pueblo Creyente would reshape the political arena, he looked to the organization as:

> . . . a place of reanimation, of the critical re-alignment of the Christian militants in the movements, since the transformation of society will not come through an indiscriminate injustice of the movements and the parties, which look for efficiency of political achievements, while neglecting ethics. . . .[69]

So even as the notion of accompaniment was being redefined to encompass an expanding role for the laity, the church's non-partisanship, and its perception of parties as obstacles to rather than vehicles of social transformation, was reiterated.

The May 1992 Assembly of Pueblo Creyente

The first assembly of Pueblo Creyente was held in San Cristóbal de Las Casas on May 5-7, 1992, with the following objective:

> That as Pueblo Creyente we analyze our reality and our problems at the diocesan level so that with the force of the Word of God we commit

[67]Ibid., 38.
[68]Ibid., 36.
[69]Ibid., 37.

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> ourselves to unite and organize, thus together we can advance the construction of the church of the poor.[70]

The meeting began with a brief analysis of political and economic issues facing the communities such as the need to organize, division and disagreement within the communities, problems with land, a new radio station in indigenous languages "which confuses the people," the reforms of constitutional Article 27, threats and attacks against Samuel Ruiz, the decision of forty communities to take the National Indianist Institute (INI) offices in May, coffee prices, and water and electricity taxes. Participants and observers alike were struck by the high level of critical consciousness which characterized the discussion.[71]

Assembly participants discussed a number of questions including, "how does the Word of God help us to continue working for the life of the people?" They concluded:

> We believe in a fighting God, who struggles with us to defend ourselves against injustice, who gives us strength and hope to continue to move ahead, to unite to organize ourselves. He has awakened us, so together we are able to reclaim our rights. To have patience and self respect. To listen to us. We have the support of God through all the servants of the Word who are proclaiming and denouncing.[72]

The members of Pueblo Creyente were committed believers, who had come together to find ways to put their faith into action. The group which gathered, however, was small. Pueblo Creyente would need to wait until its 1993 assembly to come into its own.

The February 1993 Assembly of Pueblo Creyente

Two hundred and twenty-six people participated in the February 1993 assembly of Pueblo Creyente. Included in this number were representatives from fourteen

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[70]Victoria Espejo, "Asamblea del pueblo creyente," *Encuentros* 9 (julio-agosto 1992): 19.
[71]Ibid., 19.
[72]Ibid., 22.

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campesino organizations such as CIOAC, OCEZ, CNPA, and CRIACH.[73] The presence of these groups marked an important convergence of political initiatives in Chiapas. Again there was a sense of optimism that the campesinos, unified in their poverty and in their faith, were becoming stronger. The group had gathered to look for a "way to rebuild the popular social fabric." They were trying to reconstruct a sense of trust among themselves which had "been lost in the downpour of ideas." They acknowledged their differences but were convinced that differentness did not need to equal weakness. Although it respected the uniqueness of all participants, Pueblo Creyente sought a single path, maintaining, "There is a very long way to travel. It is necessary to walk guided by the same path. . . . That will be an organization of life and commitment as Christians." The Christian commitment was, in the end, the unifying factor, although the church as an institution was recognized as part of the system which needed to be rebuilt.[74]

Throughout this gathering an image of a tree was used to illustrate the position of Pueblo Creyente in the larger society:

> The root: includes culture, religion, spirituality, the ethic of the poor and believing people and the popular movements. This root implies a struggle for life. Ethics and religion conform to an essential dimension of civil society;
> The trunk: Pueblo Creyente and similar structures; and
> The branches: the growing popular participation, which is going to grow into a new civil society, alternative and popular.[75]

Bishop Ruiz addressed the gathering explaining, "Unity is a gift of God but it is also a human work, and with the help of God we are going to achieve it."[76] Over and

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[73]National Coordinating Committee "Plan de Ayala" (CNPA), Regional Council of Indigenous Representatives of the Highlands of Chiapas (CRIACH).

[74]José Luis Cortés, O.P., "El pueblo creyente crece como una plantita: a propósito de la asamblea del pueblo creyente," *Encuentros* 13 (febrero-abril 1993): 22-23.

[75]Ibid., 24.

[76]"Encuentro de representantes pueblo creyente" (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 25-27 febrero 1993), 1, photocopied.

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over again the theme of unity of poor people who trust in God was sounded. One of the organizers put it this way:

> We know that we are here from various organizations; God wants us, in these days, to feel with one heart and one thought, also as poor people we are here all together. . . . I believe that as Pueblo Creyente, as poor people it is just to be here united to work together on one single path. . . . God wants unity; here we are different organizations, but we want unity in order to construct the Kingdom of God.[77]

The focus of Pueblo Creyente is on the construction of the Kingdom of God. Apparently this was acceptable to the secular organizations represented at this gathering. But as will be discussed at length in Chapter Seven, the meshing of the pursuit of the Kingdom of God with political goals can be problematic.

Ironically, falling back on long-standing traditional power relations, the laity involved in Pueblo Creyente still seemed to draw inspiration from the episcopal authority of the bishop. One participant commented:

> . . . we are trying to unite ourselves and we believe that Christ must be in the middle of us and only in this way will we be able to change. The history of the people of God says that when the people of Israel were suffering, God took them out of suffering with the strength of the man. . . . Now we are together with all the organizations and we are looking for unity and mutual respect; for this, the bishop tells us by way of the Word of God, we are going to become conscious, to unite ourselves and have more strength.[78]

Toward this end, Pueblo Creyente, which "searches to cooperate for the unity of the poor people," used this gathering to dialogue with other organizations in order to understand the work of these groups; they pursued points of agreement, acknowledging and respecting the variety of ways different organizations work, to support each other and strengthen channels of communication in order to improve their communities. Each organization was given the opportunity to describe its objectives, the nature of its

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[77]Ibid., 3-4.
[78]Ibid., 4.

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work, its achievements, obstructions and weaknesses. The pastoral agents in attendance were also asked to address any problems they had understanding the organizations and Pueblo Creyente.

The oldest organization was the OCEZ which at the time of this assembly had been in existence for fifty years. Its stated object was "social change" and its achievements included taking over land and strengthening its organization. Imperialism and the bourgeoisie were described as its primary obstructions.[79] Next the Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Liberty (CDLI), founded on March 13, 1986, was heard from. Its achievements included liberating political prisoners, having orders of apprehension canceled, completing various work initiatives and services for the community, and organizing the Xi'Nich March (see Chapter Seven for a description of this march). The obstacles it encountered were "bad news on the radio" and periodically from the government and the incarceration of its members. Each organization had a turn to speak and the descriptions of its work are detailed in the final report of this assembly.

Members of various Pueblo Creyente groups also introduced their work. Though a number noted they had been working together for many years, the groups were all officially created in May 1991 following their participation in the diocesan assembly. Many of the groups described the violation of human rights as one of the reasons they began to organize. The objective of the group from the Southeast Zone was "to construct the Kingdom of God where there is peace, justice and equality, to form a new society." Similar sentiments were expressed by groups in other zones. For example in the Tzotzil Zone (where Padrón worked), the representatives explained, "Pueblo Creyente looks for justice, democracy, respect of our rights by the authorities, liberty to organize ourselves because the government is oppressing us, and for better, more united coordination. . . ." The construction of the Kingdom of God, understood

[79]Ibid., 7.

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as sufficient land, democracy, health care, respect for human rights and jobs, was lifted up as the objective of the various Pueblo Creyente groups. This objective was grounded in the belief articulated by the Southeast Zone, "Pueblo Creyente is an effort which has its history in the Word of God, in the people and in their history."[80]

Some described entering into partnerships with the diocese to achieve their goals. Others talked of local economic initiatives such as community stores and collectives, the creation of health clinics, the denunciation of human rights abuses, the coordination of efforts among communities and the strengthening of their organizations as key achievements. Those of the Tzotzil Zone were particularly proud of their role in organizing the pilgrimage calling for the liberation of Father Joel Padrón, which earned Pueblo Creyente considerable notoriety and respect. The Tzotzil Zone also noted its initiatives to secure the liberty of prisoners in Chenalhó and to end the slander on the radio and in the press against the bishop. Others noted the importance of the example set by working collectively in the community.

Various weaknesses and obstacles were pointed out including: the privatization of the ejido; poverty and the economic crisis; the numerous sects in the area and the division among the people; alcoholism; the lack of understanding, awareness of, and commitment to, the Word of God; and the lack of information or the availability of false information. Also addressed were the fear which sometimes prevents the catequistas from conscientizing their communities; prediaconos and priests who do not support the liberation of the people; government threats and incarcerations; and the lack of economic resources, which makes it difficult to serve the community.

A discussion followed of the differences among the organizations--structures, levels of work, issues, methods (i.e. violence, non-violence)--and the way in which the government exploits these differences to keep people divided.[81] Some noted that

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[80]Ibid., 15, 16 and 17.
[81]Ibid., 20.

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Pueblo Creyente was distinct from the other organizations in that some of its groups only promoted pilgrimages and did not participate in "stronger actions." Others observed that most of the other organizations adhered to stricter rules. And "some organizations were born of [particular] needs while Pueblo Creyente was born in the Word of God." There was some tension between the catequistas and the other organizations because the organizations sometimes felt that although the catequistas had the Word of God, concrete work had not been produced. As one representative put it, the organizations "criticized the catequistas who lazily had the Bible in their hand and had not done anything concrete."[82] The message of the Bible could be a political motivator but it also could become an excuse for not acting. In other words, a catequista may have felt teaching the Bible to his constituents was sufficient and not have felt compelled to call the faithful to act on biblical teaching.

The objection of the organizations also points to the definitional problems with the goals, raised earlier. Those from Pueblo Creyente noted that many catequistas had encouraged campesinos to get their electoral credentials, but they also admitted that there was diversity of opinion within Pueblo Creyente itself. One catequista explained, "Many see religion as separate from politics. Many catequistas do not enter clearly into work with the people. Some are more organized, others are less so because they have less time."[83] This portion of the assembly concluded with a discussion of the qualities the organizations and Pueblo Creyente had in common. The majority of the participants were Catholics, committed to securing human rights. All of them bore criticism and threats from the authorities. All were poor. Many were catequistas. One man concluded, "We must create a house where all will fit."[84]

The discussion then turned to the next steps and all agreed that the focus should be on the upcoming elections. The group discussed the process for securing electoral

[82]Ibid.
[83]Ibid., 21.
[84]Ibid.

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credentials. They talked about their confusion and fear. They realized that the path ahead was not clearly marked but seemed to accept the critical need to participate anyway. They concluded that the path of democratization was the one they needed to take:

> It is a moment of great importance; to be united we must go out supported and clearer, not with more doubts . . . yet instead of going out fortified, we go out sad, not having a clear idea of the process of the people's liberation. The pastoral agents had reason to say they had not understood the political steps we have taken. We are afraid of getting the [electoral] credential which has a photo . . . this way they are going to disappear us more easily. Where is the political faith if we are afraid? If we want a democratic change? . . . If we vote, our vote can signify much for the next elections.[85]

In spite of the unity and its burgeoning organization, in the end, Pueblo Creyente was forced to admit that many of its number feared the ramifications of political participation.

At the close of the assembly Bishop Ruiz reflected on the proceedings. He was pleased that the meeting had been so congenial but at the same time he was nervous about the gathering. He took the opportunity to try and place this meeting in perspective. He began by reiterating that the church must be involved in the world in order to fulfill its mission. He explained, "The church is engaged in the world and we walk in time toward eternity; if we don't walk here in the world we will not arrive there."[86] But the commitment to non-partisanship remained. The bishop declared that neither Pueblo Creyente nor any other body within the church should construct itself as a political party. In other words:

> Pueblo Creyente does not define itself as an organization nor as a political party. There are catequistas, prediaconos and servidores who are engaged in bad political movements and in Pueblo Creyente. . . .

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[85]Ibid., 22.
[86]Ibid., 27.

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> Confusion is created by brothers who walk in political movements and in Pueblo Creyente.[87]

He went on to try to describe the proper relationship between faith and politics:

> Faith and religion are not to be confused with politics, nor politics confused with faith and religion. But religion and politics have a great relationship between them. Because the political can be illuminated by faith and all practical politics can be one of the diverse ways of professing faith and living religion.[88]

Ruiz was making a seemingly simple point: faith and politics are distinct; but the two are related. The former can shed light on the latter and the latter is one of the ways the former is realized. His pointing this out makes it clear that the two have often been confused.

He explained that in the end, the particular organization does not matter; what is important is the goal of creating a just and participatory society. In other words, the democratization process itself is what matters:

> The relation [between faith and politics] is only going to be strong, true and constructive if we talk with truth, and here there are problems because the enemy does not talk with truth. . . . The process of change that we want in society is more important than the organization, group or movement to which we belong. The different actions of the poor in search of a just and participatory society are those which generate a transforming process in which all the movements of people can find themselves.[89]

Ruiz concluded by clearly specifying the limits on the relationship between faith and politics. Again, he said the church could not be a political party; the church was "something more." Ruiz denied charges that the church had sent organizers into the communities, and clarified that the church was not opposed to this work being done, but said that the church itself had other work to do:

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[87]Ibid.
[88]Ibid.
[89]Ibid., 28.

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> The worry is that there have been people who say that I have sent them to make an organization. But brothers, the church cannot be a party, an organization, it is something more. The people decide to join organizations, parties, etc. . . . they say we are blessing arms, it is serious because the propaganda about the church is very great. . . . It is not acceptable that some movements want to use the structure of the catequistas for political ends. . . . Neither is it proper that the pastoral agents do this using the structure of political movements. . . . Neither can we accept that pastoral agents negatively judge movements and parties without having a basis . . . we have to take care of the path we are constructing. . . . It would not be good for me to direct a movement, and it is not because I am against it. My work is to accompany. . . .[90]

Accompaniment would continue to be a key strategy of the diocese. But in the years to come the church would be faced with a critical question: What should it do when the political path that is chosen by the people is one along which the church is unable to travel?

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[90]Ibid., 28-29.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Hour of Grace: Reclaiming Democracy

"Democracy is a process, a culture which is learned with time and practice. . . ."[1]

The period from 1990 to 1994 was a challenging and difficult period for the Diocese of San Cristóbal. The Xi'Nich march in 1992, the direct challenges to Bishop Ruiz in 1993, the Zapatista uprising and the Mexican national elections in 1994 all forced the church to clarify its role in the democratization process.

The problem of defining democracy was not new. As one examines the church's attempts to undertake this difficult task it is evident that the church and the politicians were not always speaking the same language. In some religious arenas democracy was generally equated with the eradication of injustice, societal transformation and the construction of the Kingdom of God. Some religious leaders agreed with the politicians that free and fair elections were important, but they claimed democracy was much more than procedures. Given this the church found a number of ways to fit into the democratization process including: encouraging democratic values such as respect for equality and the right to participate, and supporting democratic procedures through extensive popular education initiatives.

The period under consideration (1990-1994) in this chapter marks another important step in the church's journey to explore the value of indigenous culture and redefine the laity's relationship with the priests and religious. Religious participation in, and reaction to, the largely lay-run Xi'Nich march for indigenous rights in 1992 were signs of the changes that had occurred. In 1993, initiatives to remove Bishop Ruiz were blocked by a huge outpouring of support from the indigenous community. The 1994 presidential/gubernatorial election, following in the wake of the EZLN

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[1]Nora Pérez-Rayón, "La iglesia católica, actor estelar en los nuevos y convulsos escenarios de la vida política nacional," *El Cotidiano* 62 (mayo-junio, 1994): 62.

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uprising, sharpened the focus of pastoral work which had been under way for more than thirty years. With the help of the church and some secular organizations, the people of Chiapas and throughout Mexico engaged in a massive public education effort in support of the elections. In the end, although the electoral process was riddled with fraud and deception, for many voters the degree of participation and awareness was markedly increased from previous campaigns, and made an important contribution to the democratization process under way in Mexico.

Xi'Nich March

On March 7, 1992, members of the Committee in Defense of Indigenous Liberty (CDLI), the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Selva of Chiapas (UCISECH) and the TSOBLEJ YU'UN JWOCOLTIC, calling themselves Xi'Nich [the ant] began a march from Palenque to Mexico City. Four months earlier, in December 1991, the campesinos had taken over the municipal presidency in Palenque. Their demands had included that the communities be granted:

1. The right to name and elect their own representatives, who would be recognized by the municipal authorities;
2. The right to name three interpreters of the Ch'ol, Tzeltal and Zoque dialects, to be placed in the Public Ministries of Palenque and Ocosingo;
3. Strict vigilance of the Public Ministries and judicial police, in order to end a practice of violent treatment and detentions; and
4. Programs of reforestation.[2]

Using the public security and judicial police, the government had responded to CDLI's demands with a violent eviction on December 28. A number of people were wounded, including some children and women. One hundred and three were detained, among them, the judicial adviser of the CDLI, Father Gerónimo Hernández, S.J.

[2]Onésimo Hidalgo, "Balance de un año mas de gobierno en Chiapas: conflictos post-electorales," *Encuentros* 6 (enero-febrero 1992): 61.

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Ninety-four of these were released, but nine were charged with rebellious motives, unlawful association and being accessories to a crime, and taken to the Cerro Hueco prison in Tuxtla Guttiérez. During the trip from Palenque to Tuxtla, the prisoners were beaten and tortured by the police.[3] The governor rejected the assertion that those being held were political prisoners, explaining "in Chiapas political prisoners do not exist, those so-called political prisoners have undermined the law. . . ."[4]

The demonstration outside the municipal presidency continued through January and into February, 1992. CDLI's overtures met only with violence and no concrete solutions were achieved. Thus on March 7, the members of CDLI began their walk from Palenque to Mexico City in order to take their demands to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and other federal authorities.

> The government wanted to trample us and ruin us; it wanted to destroy the anthill and the only thing it achieved was that all the ants have come out.[5]

Numerous catequistas helped organize the March for Peace and Indigenous Rights. Bishop Ruiz, some priests and religious accompanied the people on their forty-eight day, 1,106 kilometer journey. Over four hundred people, frustrated but not defeated by the total failure of their effort to pressure the local government to address their demands, joined the march. They came from 118 communities and represented Ch'ols, Tzotzils, Tzeltals, Tojolabals and Zoques. Government representatives met Xi'Nich outside of Mexico City on April 25, 1992, and acceded to its demands, including an agreement by state officials to reform the laws to create more democratic elections.[6] Following this meeting the group went to the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe to offer thanks.

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[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., 62.

[5]Oscar Rodriquez, "Los caminos de Xi'Nich," *Encuentros* 13 (marzo-abril 1993): 63.

[6]In spite of the apparent success, Estrada Laredo was leery of the government concessions. He said, "They marched fifty days, and one day before entering the capital of the country, Gobernación gave

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The church's role in the Xi'Nich was a cause for concern, particularly among the bishop's critics. One newspaper account described the events in this way:

> They got close to Mexico City after days of painful marching from Palenque, Chiapas, 210 indigenous belonging to diverse Chiapan ethnic groups recruited by the bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Samuel Ruiz, chief in the southeast of liberation theology and strategist of the PRD in that area. The indigenous had common denominators: they didn't speak Spanish and they did not know why they came. . . . Those who were close to Samuel Ruiz noticed that "the bishop of the poor" as he calls himself--even though they also call him "the red bishop"--was worried and visibly nervous. . . . Ruiz asked Cárdenas to march with the Xi'Nich which he did for a couple of kilometers. . . . the composition of the caravan Xi'Nich was like this: ch'ols, tzelzals [*sic*], zoques: 210; priests of San Cristóbal de Las Casas led by Jerónimo Hernández: 5; priests of Puebla: 40. There was a total of 210 indigenous and 45 PRD priests so it cannot be said that the church is inactive.[7]

The church's challenge to the political system, spearheaded by the laity, had once again been interpreted by its critics as an alignment with the political opposition.

Bishop Ruiz was also accused of trying to manipulate the indigenous people to further his own political agenda:

> Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Samuel Ruiz want their march from Chiapas, like others they are promoting, to arrive in Mexico in order to see if the presence of the indigenous, in their poverty and lamentable conditions, produces some political sympathy. . . .[8]

Others held quite the opposite opinion of the meaning of this march for the indigenous people, claiming the Xi'Nich represented a new kind of movement in which indigenous people were asserting their own identities and rights in the federal arena. Social scientist María Cristina Renard explains, "the central demand [of Xi'Nich] is the respect of its ethnicity (and in the name of this, liberty of prisoners, increasing public

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them the same crumbs as always." Germán Estrada Laredo, "Yo sé quien es el subcomandante 'Marcos'," *CENCOS* (marzo 1994): 5.

[7]"Los motivos del obispo," *Excelsior*, 20 abril 1992, 31A.

[8]Ibid.

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works and an end to the marginalization)."[9] Religious participation in Xi'Nich, according to diocesan sources, was an extension of initiatives begun in the early 1970s when the church helped prepare for the Indigenous Congress.

Political Fallout from Xi'Nich

Diocesan Assembly

The Xi'Nich was clearly on the minds of the clergy as they gathered in their diocesan assembly less than a month after the conclusion of the march. The task before the assembly was to define its "accompaniment of Pueblo Creyente . . . where Pueblo Creyente is emerging as ferment, in search of a common strategy of the diocesan work." In light of an increasing dynamism of the laity, the clergy of the diocese were trying to determine how to restructure the clergy/lay relationship. Representatives of Pueblo Creyente came to the assembly to share information about the latest, relevant events of the region in which many of the Pueblo Creyente members were direct protagonists. Of particular interest to the clergy ("and of which [they] had much information from the radio and the press") was the Xi'Nich march.[10] Had the clergy played a key organizational role in the Xi'Nich, as their critics claimed, it is unlikely they would have needed to rely on news reports from the "radio and press." A few clergy did participate, but for the most part, it was the laity of the diocese who participated in the Xi'Nich march.

Having brought the clergy up-to-date on the political events, the members of Pueblo Creyente described how the organization understood itself. They explained, "The Pueblo Creyente is not only Catholic, but is comprised of all who struggle for

[9]María Cristina Renard, "Movimiento campesino y organizaciones políticas: el caso de Simojovel-Huitiupan," *Encuentros* 9 (julio-agosto 1992): 51.

[10]Victoria Espejo, "Reseña de la asamblea diocesana 18 al 20 de mayo de 1992," *Encuentros* 8 (mayo-junio 1992): 8 and 9.

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unity with the goal of searching for justice, dignity and peace." The representatives discussed their many achievements but noted they could have done even more with the pastoral agents' support, explaining, "there are pastoral agents who do not identify with the people."[11] The laity was moving ahead. They were eager to secure diocesan support, but not willing to be delayed if it was slow in coming.

Christmas Greeting

In his annual Christmas message to the diocese, Bishop Ruiz captured the volatility of the historical moment at hand. He told his parishioners, "It is necessary to revise, using Latin American culture and values, the meaning of 'development,' 'democracy,' [and] 'solidarity' . . . in order to continue on the liberating path toward transformation, from within the society. . . ."[12] He recounted the commemoration that had taken place in the diocese--and during the fourth meeting of the Latin American episcopacy in Santo Domingo--of the "traumatic encounter of 1492." He was particularly proud of, and impressed by, the indigenous participation in these commemorative events. Ruiz recalled:

> We celebrated a night of prayer in adoration and reflection in the Cathedral of San Cristóbal. We made a pilgrimage in the early morning as a sign of hope which culminated with a Eucharist in which indigenous diaconos actively participated. The organizations and popular movements also convened marches which took place in practically all of the *cabeceras municipales*. The indigenous participation was notorious for its number and organization.[13]

Conservative estimates, according to the bishop, counted ten thousand people in the pilgrimage, a few of whom knocked down the statue of the founder of the city in a

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[11]Ibid., 9.

[12]Samuel Ruiz García, "¡Feliz Navidad!" (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, diciembre 1992), 1, photocopied.

[13]Ibid., 2.

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symbolic gesture rejecting the conquest. The bishop and some brothers were accused of having provoked the indigenous in this action.

Later in Ruiz's Christmas message he highlighted three successes: The Xi'Nich march where the indigenous "found in their walk a type of solidarity which is unforgettable for them"; the founding Assembly of the Citizen's Movement for Democracy (MCD) was proudly hosted by the diocese which was "conscious of the importance of participation of Christians in the growth of civil society"; and the laity's increasing activity as full participants of the church through the work of Pueblo Creyente.[14] For the bishop these developments were signs of hope. The actions of indigenous lay people were applauded and supported by most priests and religious. This, coupled with the increasing urgency of calls from civil society for a democratic transition in Mexico, provided the backdrop for two stormy and historic years for the church and the government.

En esta hora de gracia, 1993

The socio-political context of the May 1993 diocesan assembly was characterized by uncertainty and fear. There had been news of a confrontation between alleged guerrillas and the Mexican army in the selva of Ocosingo. Some claimed the army was using the pretext of rampant narcotraffic in Chiapas to justify intervention in the region. Eight indigenous Tzeltal campesinos of the community of Pataté Viejo had been incarcerated. Cardinal Juan José Posadas was assassinated in the parking lot of the Guadalajara airport.

Two hundred and ten people attended the diocesan assembly; for the first time ever, sixteen of that number were representatives chosen by Pueblo Creyente to attend

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[14]Ibid., 3.

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as members of the diocesan assembly.[15] The assembly's objective--"In the face of this historic juncture, to reflect on our prophetic task and our pastoral action in order to achieve and witness greater diocesan unity"--responded to the pervasive feeling that society was on the edge and the church should construct a united response. But the assembly's final report noted the existence of dissension within the diocese, stating, "The struggle against the diocese is also internal and this is significant."[16] For some, recent pastoral initiatives to empower the indigenous laity were moving too quickly.

Though many at this assembly were disillusioned by the internal and external strife, the bishop offered words of encouragement and inspiration to those who had gathered:

> We are not accustomed to having the point of departure, "if we do not see, we do not walk." . . . The path of God is in the signs of the times, it will not come by way of angels, but by works and words; we have to see the light of his written Word--his Word in history--in order to have the entire Word . . .[17]

Ruiz explained that the diocese often moved into uncharted territory in order to determine God's will. He dismissed the notion of divine revelation, telling the assembly that the "path of God" would be revealed in their "works and words"; in other words, their actions. They had an obligation to participate in the realization of their religious commitment.

The assembly engaged in a long discussion of how to be prophetic in the face of the troubling events of the time. Bishop Ruiz concluded:

> Opinions about the prophet are abundant: The prophet is not so much he who yells, but he who speaks in the name of God. When Moses complained that he could not speak well, God pointed out Aaron, in this way the prophet is he who denounces from the context of faith. But there are differences between sociological denunciations, and

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[15]Jorge Santiago, "Asamblea diocesana," *Encuentros* 15 (24-28 mayo 1993): 6.

[16]"Asamblea diocesana extraordinaria," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, julio 29-30 1993), 1 and 4, photocopied.

[17]Ibid., 5.

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> denunciations from the context of faith which continue with an announcement of hope and life, offer alternatives and are not separated from the life of the people. The invitation is to make ourselves prophets as a diocese, where structure and function would be congruent with the announcement of the Gospel.[18]

Ruiz's explanation of the prophet offers important insight into his understanding of the distinction between faith and politics. Both the prophet and the politicians denounce injustice, but the prophet also announces hope and life. Ruiz was indeed calling the diocese to denounce the ills which plague society; but he also demanded that the diocese offer the message of the Gospel as an alternative.

A few months after this assembly, on August 6, 1993, Bishop Ruiz's pastoral letter, "En esta hora de gracia (in this hour of grace)," was completed. This letter was delivered to the Pope on the occasion of his visit to the Yucatan Peninsula, celebrating indigenous Catholics. In the almost forty page letter, the bishop implored various groups, communities and individuals to look for ways to initiate changes in the social structures without waiting to be pushed to the edge "by the desperation of those who have been ancestrally downtrodden." He stressed the necessity for strong morals and "good hearts" in this task. Societal change, creating a society which takes into account the various ethnic cultures, he continued, would only be plausible if spaces for economic, political and social participation were created. Poverty or the lack of goods generated by modernity and the "rawness of neoliberalism," the bishop wrote, were an "evil contrary to the will of God." He denounced neoliberal modernity's lack of concern for the diversity of peoples as if they were a "hindrance."[19]

The bishop's letter received warm praise and harsh criticism. After its release rumors immediately circulated that the government had engaged in a campaign to remove Ruiz from the diocese, although the government emphatically denied these

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[18]Ibid., 10.

[19]Elio Henríquez, "Llama el obispo Ruiz al diálogo a grupos que están en conflicto," *La Jornada*, 10 agosto 1993, 6. See Chapter Three for a more detailed analysis of the theological content of the pastoral letter.

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allegations. For his part the Papal Nuncio, Girólamo Prigione, who had never been a supporter of Ruiz, confirmed that the Vatican was indeed studying the possibility of Bishop Ruiz's removal. However, Prigione emphasized, "Do not treat it as a political matter, [we did not] receive pressure from the government, or anyone." The Nuncio continued, "The diocese [of San Cristóbal de Las Casas] is conflict-ridden, not only now but has been for twenty years, because Don Samuel Ruiz has [committed] grave doctrinal, pastoral and governmental errors, which clash with the ministry of the church. . . ." When asked by journalists how he would react to a move, Ruiz responded, "I am a man of the church and if they send me to other responsibilities, I will accept those responsibilities."[20]

In the end of October, a small group of diocesan advisers met to discuss what had by then become the strong possibility of Bishop Ruiz's removal. They talked about the need to provide a doctrinal defense to the accusations. They acknowledged that the response of Pueblo Creyente, other organizations and the press could not be controlled by the diocese and noted the numerous letters of support arriving from around the world. A long discussion ensued regarding the political ramifications of the attack on the bishop especially during this time of national political transition. Given that the presidential elections were less than one year away, they discussed the possibility of a mobilized church acting as a catalyst during the electoral process, or as an entity which could delegitimize the government, by demonstrating the existence of an opposition.[21] Though there is little evidence that either of these ideas received any further attention, it is significant that they were seriously considered by Ruiz's closest advisers. In the

[20] "Anuncio de cambio de 'obispos' causa conmoción y controversia," *el diario*, 1 noviembre 1993, 40. It is interesting to note that the bishop received a letter from the Vatican dated August 31, 1993, in which an upper level functionary wrote: "His Holiness has entrusted me with the task sending his living gratitude for this gesture of closeness and communion, and at the same time to assure you of his remembrance in prayer for your episcopal service in this beloved diocese which makes the Señor very happy."

[21] "Reunion del consejo diocesano de pastoral," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 28 octubre 1993, 5, photocopied.

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end, the group's plan to address this crisis included issuing a communication to the pastoral agents and people of the diocese, and dispelling rumors which had been propagated about their "beloved" bishop.

The advisers' document to the diocese declared the steadfast commitment of priests, religious and pastoral agents of the diocese to the bishop. It explained:

> There are people who feel their interests--not always genuine or Christian--are affected by the work of the diocese, and the demands for justice we proclaim in agreement with the Holy Gospel. These persons from time to time lift up threats against our bishop. It is the practice of the church to ask for clarification of the accusations it receives. . . . These attacks and threats are directed against the church, Christ's instrument for the salvation of the world. We are convinced that in this way, Satan tries to block the step of Christ through humanity and make the exercise of caring for the poorest and most helpless--which occupies a preferential location in the pastoral work of our diocese--more difficult. . . .
>
> We ask for prayers that God, our father, will strengthen our bishop with his spirit and grant the grace of conversion to those who pledge to destroy the work of Christ. We also ask for prayers for our beloved country, a place where political motives are present in the accusations lifted up.
>
> We urge all faithful Christians not to let themselves be carried away by rumors which sow unnecessary inquietude, sure that the diocese, in its proper time, will send all the true information which must be known by the people of God.[22]

This document asserts that the initiatives of the diocese are in accord with the Gospel, and those who dissent from this view are on the side of Satan. Although there is an undeniable lack of humility in this document, its authors do offer prayers for the conversion of their enemies. In light of the recent developments regarding the empowerment of religious laity, the final paragraph of this quotation demonstrates that some among the church leadership still adhered to a notably one-sided relationship.

[22]Comisión de Información, "Comunicado a la Diócesis a todos los agentes de pastoral y pueblo de Dios," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 30 octubre 1993), photocopied.

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A few days later the pastoral agents gathered and issued their own statement of support for the bishop which better reflected the new relationship between the laity and the clergy. They declared that an accusation of the bishop was also an accusation of them and the thousands of men and women who strove to implement the pastoral work of the diocese. They celebrated the widespread demonstrations of support for the bishop, finding comfort in the realization that "his evangelizing labor had reached other parts of the country, the continent and of the world." Gathering strength from the bishop's controversial pastoral letter, the pastoral agents explained:

> It encourages us to continue persevering in prayer and proclamation of the Gospel which Don Samuel, in these moments of challenge and worry, has invited us to live as an hour of grace: a time of reflection, conversion and evangelization.[23]

A press release from the diocese described the overwhelming support for the bishop demonstrated by almost three hundred citizen's organizations, including Xi'Nich. In another example of the intermingling of religious and political activity, the MCD issued a statement claiming, "The citizen's organizations cannot be at the margin of this new political attack, which we consider to be against democracy."[24] In what was heralded at the time as the largest protest in the history of Chiapas, more than fifteen thousand people, the majority of whom were indigenous campesinos, marched through the streets of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in a demonstration of their support for the bishop.[25] The bishop and his diocese's level of involvement in the democratization process was such that an attack on the former was interpreted by some as an attack on the latter.

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[23]Asamblea extraordinaria de agentes de pastoral, "Pronunciamiento de los agentes de pastoral de la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de Las Casas reunidos en asamblea extraordinaria en apoyo a nuestro obispo," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 2 noviembre 1993), photocopied.

[24]Comisión de Información, "Boletín de Prensa," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 9 Noviembre 1993), photocopied.

[25]Jonathan Fox, "The Challenge of Democracy: Rebellion as Catalyst," *Akwe:kon Journal of Indigenous Issues* XI no. 2 (Summer 1994): 15.

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A catechetical course on faith and politics, presented in the height of this controversy, did not escape notice of the bishop's critics. During this course, catequistas studied Moses and the ancient Israelites and discussed the ways faith and politics helped their work. One participant noted:

> These courses make us more aware. . . . In each course we learn how we can better help our communities. Before we thought that as catequistas or servidores of the church, we could not involve ourselves in politics. But now we see that those ancient Israelites did not separate like that. . . . We see that faith and politics walk together even though they think distinctly.[26]

Though many would have deemed it impossible, the event which followed would thrust the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, at least temporarily, into the role of one of the primary actors in the democratization process. Although this position brought with it a level of recognition which precluded the bishop's removal, it also opened the work of the diocese to an expanded and more vociferous group of critics.

The Uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), 1994[27]

Early in the morning on January 1, 1994, some of the poor people of this rich land, calling themselves Zapatistas (after the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata) and covering their faces with ski masks or bandannas, entered four towns--Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, Altamirano and San Cristóbal de Las Casas--in Chiapas and posted a manifesto which proclaimed, "Today we say enough is enough. . . ."[28] When

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[26]"Tercero curso de fe y politica," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 4-6 octubre 1993), 4, photocopied.

[27]The details of, and debates about, the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation have been considered at length in a myriad of fora; it is not my intention to review that material here. I will look at this event with an eye to understanding the church's role in the situation.

[28]Collier, 2. The EZLN also had a presence in municipios of Chanal, Huixtán and Oxchuc. The fighting lasted until January 10. On January 11 the government called a cease-fire and named Manuel Camacho Solis commissioner of peace.

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Mexico's president Carlos Salinas de Gortari received a message about the uprising in Chiapas. his plans for Mexico's economic, social and political transformation were rudely interrupted. The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas radically reshaped the political and economic reality of Mexico.[29] The Zapatistas were not in pursuit of governmental control; what they were calling for was the removal of Salinas, and the democratic election of a new president. In this way, their armed uprising was meant to contribute to, not preclude, Mexico's transition to democracy. The Salinas Administration was forced to determine how indigenous revolutionaries fit into the political and economic framework of a country striving toward parity with first-world trading partners, Canada and the United States. As journalist Max Ortega observed:

> Prior to the first of January, 1994, the electoral strategy had been consolidated as the only legitimate way to secure democratic change. After this date, the discussion opened up. Another strategy, the armed strategy, entered to form a part of the debate, quickly obtaining legitimacy and mass consensus which had been lacking in the sixties and seventies.[30]

In their urgency to locate the source of the uprising and stabilize the economic and political situation, the Mexican government and economic elite did what had often been done in the past: they accused the Catholic church in Chiapas. As it had been in the past the church in Chiapas was a visible, tangible target. The government did not know precisely how to blame the EZLN or the elusive Comandante Marcos. So, Bishop Samuel Ruiz and "his" catequistas were identified as being responsible for the rebellion. Luis Pazos, well-known Mexican academic and author of the bestseller, *¿Por que Chiapas?* puts it this way:

> . . . the declarations of the indigenous members of the *frente zapatista*, who explained that they were persuaded to participate in the struggle by

[29]It was no coincidence that the uprising took place on the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement, which the Zapatistas considered tantamount to their death sentence, went into effect.

[30]Max Ortega, "Chiapas: Dos estrategias de poder," *CENCOS* (agosto 1994): 5.

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> the catequistas, cause us to conclude that there are activists shielded in religion behind this insurrection.[31]

These accusations were widely circulated in the national and international press. The *Washington Post* reported that the government of Mexico accused the church, particularly Bishop Ruiz and the catequistas, of encouraging unrest. The article reported:

> At the base of the Zapatista recruitment structure, the [Mexican government] report said, is a group of radical lay ministers trained in Ruiz's diocese, whom the government accused of working in the countryside and "pressuring entire families into becoming new members of their violent cause."[32]

The *Wall Street Journal,* also convinced by the Mexican government's report, ran an article describing the "hierarchy" of the uprising and delineating the church's successful manipulation of the plight of the indigenous people:

> The hierarchy in the Chiapas uprising is clear. At the base of the guerrilla pyramid lie the Indian and mestizo peasants. Although they fight hard to settle real and concrete grievances concerning political oppression and social and economic inequality, they are also aroused by the religious preaching of thousands of catechizers. These soldiers of liberation theology advocate the use of violence to instill the teachings of Jesus Christ and to achieve perfect equality on earth. The Indians offer their fervor and lives, the catechizers their sermons.[33]

Again the diocese, which had in fact criticized the existing political system, found itself automatically associated with an opposition movement. One point the *Wall Street Journal* reporter overlooked is that the majority of the catequistas are Indians. The catechizers and the Indians are the same.

The EZLN flatly rejected any church connection to its activities. In his communiqué of January 11, 1994, Subcomandante Marcos stated explicitly:

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[31]Luis Pasos, *¿Por que Chiapas?* (México D.F.: Editorial Diana, 1994), 37.

[32]Todd Robberson, "Mexico Says Catholic Church Fomented Peasant Rebellion," *Washington Post,* 10 January 1994, 12(A).

[33]Enrique Krauze, "New *Zapatistas* Sully Memory of Their Namesake," *The Wall Street Journal,* 21 January 1994, 13(A).

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> . . . we have no ties to Catholic religious authorities or any other creed. We have not received orientation, direction or support from any church structure, not from any diocese in any state, not from the Papal Nuncio, not from the Vatican, not from anyone. . . . We want liberation--but without theology.[34]

In an interview in the Cathedral of San Cristóbal on February 28, 1994, Marcos was asked about the church. He responded that his *compañeros* had prohibited him from discussing two subjects during the interview: affirmations or denunciations of particular political parties; and the church. Marcos explained that church leaders, more than any other group, had been accused of being the true commanders of the EZLN. He went on, "We know this is not true. The church also knows it is not true. . . . For this reason, the compañeros say the first thing we have to do is make clear the purity and independence of our movement."[35]

The church however, had responded swiftly to the uprising. On January 1, 1994, the three bishops of Chiapas issued a joint statement affirming the Christian commitment to the construction of the Kingdom of God. They quoted Pope John Paul II's statement that: "poverty and misery are a constant threat to social stability . . . no one can sit quietly while the problem of poverty . . . has not found an adequate solution." The bishops' statement explained their position as the religious authorities of the region: "We do not accept an armed uprising, nor the recourse to violence, but they both must serve as warnings of the danger of abandoning the marginalized groups."[36] Although the church denounced the use of violence, many saw this and similar statements as being overly understanding or sympathetic toward the EZLN.

The church's pastoral work in this diocese was well-known (and widely criticized) for its commitment to the option for the poor; therefore despite Marcos' denials, the church was forced to address the accusations of having instigated the uprising. During an interview with Father Pablo Romo, the director of the diocesan

[34]John Ross, *Rebellion from the Roots* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press), 223.
[35]José Alvarez, "CENCOS entrevista a Marcos," *CENCOS* (marzo 1994): 8.
[36]"*Mensaje de los obispos de Chiapas*," *CENCOS* (enero 1994): 8.

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human rights center, journalist Sergio Sarmiento commented on the close ties between the work of the church and various social organizations. Sarmiento asked how Father Romo, in the face of the increasing criticism, would characterize the church's relationship to these organizations. Father Romo did not deny the connection; he explained, ". . . the decision-making of the organizations is autonomous, but pastoral agents participate in the organizations as faithful Christians trying to critically illuminate the path from the perspective of the Gospel. . . ."[37] Romo's comments echo earlier discussions regarding, and raise similar questions about, the nature of religious accompaniment. Anthropologist Jan Rus observed:

> That the church has been very close to the communities of the selva, especially in the Cañadas, is now a double-edged sword, because now the government tries to explain the armed conflict by the proximity of the church to these communities. On the other hand, in this conflict, Don Samuel and some of his collaborators seem to be the only possible intermediaries to arrive at a political solution of the conflict, precisely because they are close to the communities. . . .[38]

The Zapatistas' request that Bishop Ruiz serve as mediator of the conflict and Ruiz's acceptance of this critical role further complicated the EZLN-ecclesial relationship.[39]

That year in his Lenten message to the diocese, Ruiz appeared confident that the violence, which had ended, had permanently transformed civil society, and that with vigilant citizen participation a new Mexico could be created. He wrote, "Here, the civil society abruptly woke up and reinforced that in the future the conscious citizen cannot return to the passivity and conformity of the past. . . ."[40]

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[37]Sergio Sarmiento S., "Entrevista a: Pablo Romo," *cuadernos agrarios* 8-9 (nueva época: Mexico D.F. 1994): 156.

[38]Hilda Iparraguirre, "Como en tiempos de fray Bartolomé," *La Reforma* (5 febrero 1994): 38.

[39]Probably because of the alleged ties between the two groups the government was initially reluctant to allow Ruiz to act in this capacity. However, the government did agree, and the first stage of negotiations--held in the cathedral in San Cristóbal--began on February 21 and lasted through March 3, 1994.

[40]Samuel Ruiz García, "Exhortación cuaresmal 1994," *CENCOS* (marzo 1994): 35.

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A diocesan assembly held in April 1994 considered ways to orient the pastoral work of the diocese toward unity and reconciliation. However, the discussion was tense as the various members of the assembly shared their reservations and questions about the course the diocese was taking. One participant noted that in the eyes of the public the diocese appeared more and more closely tied to the EZLN. Others pointed out that to some outside observers, the diocese seemed more political than pastoral. The possibility of naming a coadjutor arose again. Carlos Bravo observed that the church had been steadfast in its commitment to "the cause of the poor, of life, of the indigenous" but in supporting these commitments, it "had lost the national horizon." The causes which it supported were diluting the church.[41] Concerns about the credibility of the diocese were raised since no one person had been identified as its key spokesperson. The need for the priests and religious to stay connected to the laity was stressed. The participants of the assembly recognized that events in the diocese had ramifications that extended far beyond the geographic boundaries of the diocese. Bishop Ruiz emphasized, "That which we are doing here is not unrelated to the action of the church in the whole country."[42] The socio-political context was changing rapidly, placing greater demands on the church to define its role in the democratization process or risk being reduced to simply reacting to outside influences.

In the end the assembly agreed, "We are conscious that we are in a new stage which did not come as a surprise; the pastoral action has a political dimension. It is a new phase but not unknown. . . ."[43] Building on more than thirty years of pastoral work, which on numerous occasions brought the diocese into the political arena, they agreed to continue a course committed to an option for the poor, and accepted the religious and political consequences of this commitment. They discussed two areas in

[41]Minutes of *Asamblea Diocesana Extraordinaria* (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, primavera 1994), 3-5, photocopied.

[42]"Preasamblea diocesana documento," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 18-20 abril 1994), 2, photocopied.

[43]Ibid., 7.

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which they would focus their attention: the autoctonous church, and the elections and democracy. They clarified the meaning of autoctonous church, agreeing that an autoctonous church was one which had its own strength, capacity and ministers which reflected its own faith within its own plan and cultural framework. The willingness of pastoral agents to pay the price of the creation of an autoctonous church was discussed at length (including the need to learn the indigenous languages and overcome racism), but not resolved.[44]

The members of the assembly agreed the EZLN had opened up the possibility of a transition to democracy. The assembly considered the EZLN's thesis that the presence of democracy is a necessary condition for social and economic transformation. They talked about the mobilization of civil society and elections free of fraud. They were hopeful that Camacho Solis, the government's representative to the negotiations, would play a role in activating civil society. The situation in the indigenous communities was of some concern since "there was no work on behalf of the electoral opposition, and apathy--a desire not to vote--was present." It was noted that some communities were distrustful of help offered by the church because the alleged links between the EZLN and the church had exposed those affiliated with the church to threats and repression.[45]

In conclusion, the members noted that they had been engaged in giving courses in faith and politics, visiting the communities where they clarified the role of the church and helped people to reflect on the pastoral letter. In the future the assembly agreed to stay connected to the base. Some considered this tense and difficult time an opportunity when, with the help of Pueblo Creyente, new initiatives could be undertaken: ". . . The vacuum of authority can be a moment of creation of something new. Pueblo Creyente must be considered in the reconstruction of the diocese."[46]

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[44]Ibid., 12 and 16.
[45]Ibid., 18-19 and 28.
[46]Minutes of *Asamblea Diocesana Extraordinaria*, 9.

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A month later, in May 1994, ninety-eight people attended the Pueblo Creyente assembly. As in the diocesan assembly, the task before them was to clarify their role in light of God's Word and in the aftermath of the EZLN uprising. They hoped to find a way to improve communication among pastoral agents and Pueblo Creyente and to participate in the construction of justice and peace.

The meeting began with a discussion of what had happened in the communities since January 1. Fear was a prevalent theme. The participants told of government pressures, communities which were divided and the ramifications of the catequistas and the bishop being held responsible for the events which had taken place. They also discussed problems with the Zapatistas who took land and did not allow people to move freely, noting that, at times, the army did this also.

Doubts and questions were raised. One participant described a scenario which occurred in a number of communities: ". . . when the conflict began on the first of January, they began to say the Catholic catequistas were Zapatistas and the work of the word of God became lifeless. . . ." A simple, yet profound question was asked: "What are the real possibilities the church offers for the economic crisis which the country is in?"[47] The members of Pueblo Creyente wanted to know what the church could provide in terms of concrete solutions to the problems facing the people of Chiapas. This question points to the increasing tension between pragmatic political demands and religious rhetoric.

The discussion turned briefly to the issue of elections, and participants raised questions such as: Which party are we going to vote for? What is the position of the bishop? What do we believe about political parties? How can we achieve a change in government and secure peace?[48] But it quickly returned to issues more directly tied to

[47]"Asamblea del pueblo creyente San Cristóbal de Las Casas," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 16 mayo 1994), 10, photocopied.

[48]Later in the meeting the group said this about the electoral process: "As Pueblo Creyente we cannot say which party we are going to vote for; we have said that we are going to respect the liberty of the vote but it is important to know and to think carefully which party we are going to vote for, taking

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the church such as: What action is Pueblo Creyente going to take? What is the role of the catequistas? Why don't all pastoral agents share the pastoral line of the diocese? Others talked about the division within the communities which took place when those with arms demanded the participation of others in the community. They asked, "As Pueblo Creyente, are we going to be in relation with the Zapatista brothers because they are also believers and we suffer the same situation? Is it possible or not?" The question of whether or not the Zapatistas had a relationship with the diocese was thoroughly discussed. One of the leaders of Pueblo Creyente concluded:

> Yes, the Zapatistas have a relationship with the diocese. I know that there are some believers who are Zapatistas. The dignity of the children of God is important. . . . Don Samuel has said the work of the diocese has awakened the people. . . . Our diocese claims we are the children of God, we have stomachs, we have needs.[49]

In sum, members of Pueblo Creyente understood that the pastoral work had inspired the people of the diocese. They had been told that God was their father and now, as God's children, they were asking for what they needed.

A Large House

The church was uniquely positioned to play an important role in helping to transform the oppressed and the oppressor. As one Pueblo Creyente participant put it, ". . . the Word of God does not stay inside the community. It also tries to open the hearts of the powerful to God. The role of the church is to construct the Kingdom, a life abundant."[50] Thus the catequistas have an obligation to act as mediators because it is not only the bishop who is called to construct the Kingdom but the entire diocese.

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into account that our object is to construct the Casa Grande (large house)." A date for the course about Democracy and Elections was set for June 24-25. Ibid., 19.

[49]Ibid., 14.

[50]Ibid., 15.

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Finally, Pueblo Creyente agreed to clarify its role in the events taking place in Chiapas:

> A new being is born, the fruit of a deep pain; something new is born, or wants to be born, but still has not seen if it is going to be born or it is going to die on the path. . . . Pueblo Creyente has faith and hope and is assisting in the birth of this new people and the large house we want to construct. The Protestant brothers--who believe in God--are here and also look to construct the large house. The brothers of the sects--who are also poor--are here, are also equal helpers; the Zapatista brothers struggle in order to birth a new people. All the authorities are [assistants] to the birth of this new being, in the middle of all of these brothers, of many helpers, we are going to try to locate ourselves, to find our role in the middle of this expectation, in the middle of this work, of struggling to birth the new being and to construct the large house. . . .[51]

A New Role for the Church

An atmosphere of fear and uncertainty pervaded both the diocesan assembly and the Pueblo Creyente assembly. However, while the clergy were trying to protect the integrity of the church by warding off unwanted outside influences and struggling to remain connected to the base, the laity were witnessing the possibility of the birth of a new way of living.

Having been propelled into the spotlight by the dramatic turn of events, many took the opportunity to consider anew the role of the church in Mexican society. Jan Rus lamented the prominent position still held by the church and looked toward the day when the work of the church was no longer necessary:

> . . . it seems to me summarily tragic that in Chiapas and possibly in much of Mexico sufficient civil spaces where the people themselves can defend their rights still do not exist. Returning to the parallel with Fray Bartolomé and his first church, after 450 years it is a true shame that the campesino people must continue supporting themselves in the church in

[51]Ibid., 17.

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> order to defend their rights. . . . that the church is still so involved clearly demonstrates to me that in Chiapas and probably in a good part of Mexico, [people] still live as in colonial times. If Mexico were a mature, adult, modern country the centers of human rights would not have to exist and would not be missed.[52]

Rejecting what amounted to a secularization theory, those within the church--which many counted as one of the most influential institutions in civil society--perceived their continued participation as essential to the transformation of society.[53] An open letter written by the pastoral agents in June 1994 reiterated a call from civil society for "true democracy" which emerged loudly and clearly in the wake of the EZLN uprising. The letter affirmed, "the principal aspiration of the majority in this moment, and the central demand of the different organizations, is the change toward a true democracy. . . ." It went on to explain that democracy meant clean elections, but also much more. Democracy was characterized by the people's participation in the creation of a country which guaranteed basic human rights and served all people. "Mexico," the pastoral agents concluded, "will not be the same after what happened in Chiapas. . . . No one must be nor feel themselves excluded . . . especially the Christians. . . ."[54]

The EZLN may have wanted "liberation without theology" but the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas did not want theology without liberation.

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[52]Iparraguirre, 38.

[53]Fox, "The Challenge of Democracy," 19.

[54]Agentes de pastoral, "Pronunciamiento aclaratorio de los agentes de pastoral al pueblo de Dios de la Diócese de San Cristóbal," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, junio 1994), 6 and 7, photocopied.

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Reclaiming Democracy

The pastoral agents' letter was not the first evidence of the church considering the ecclesial definition of, and responsibility for, democracy. Episcopal, clergy and lay organizations had actively engaged in a search for clarity about democracy and democratization for several years.

The Bishops and Democracy

In March 1991, the Mexican Episcopal Conference (CEM) penned a document entitled: "Pastoral Orientation of the Mexican Episcopacy: Free and Democratic Elections, a Challenge for the Destiny of Mexico." The document was divided into three parts; in the first, definitions of church, democracy and politics were discussed. The second highlighted the moral obligation to vote, and the third explained that the vote is exercised for the good of all.

Democracy, according to the document, was a compilation of values, political systems and democratic requirements. Two democratic values--fundamental equality of all men and women and sociopolitical participation--were emphasized. In a democratic society, the CEM maintained, "these values must be accepted, promoted, defended and practiced. . . ."[55] Elections were an important component of democracy, the CEM continued:

> The democratic political system of the states is expressed in the periodic renovation of the authorities in a single way: popular elections, which to have legitimacy, must be free of pressure, repression, manipulation and fraud. . . . The democratic political system originates from the sovereignty of the people, which resides precisely and exclusively with the people, not in the parties nor in any of the three fundamental powers (executive, legislative and judicial). . . .[56]

[55]"Elecciones libres y democráticas," *Encuentros* 3 (julio-agosto 1991): 21.
[56]Ibid., 22.

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But the CEM pointed out that theory and practice are not always consonant; fraudulent elections occur in constitutionally democratic societies. For this reason, they asserted, "a constant process of criticism and purification is indispensable to democratic life in society and in the state so that democratic values can become democratic life."[57] In other words, for the theory to become reality, stringent vigilance and constant renovation were necessary. This was one way the church contributed to democratization. By helping to inculcate the values which must accompany successful democratic procedures, the church (which the CEM defined as all who are faithful believers in Jesus Christ) pushed the society and the state towards true democracy.

Thus the CEM concluded elections were a key, but not the only, component of democracy. The transition to democracy, according to the CEM, entailed the transformation of society:

> For the poor and believing people of Mexico, the transition of this society to democracy is a struggle which puts at stake not only the recognition of various ideologies, but survival, the possibility of eating, of not dying of some illness associated with poverty, the aspirations and the deepest desires of a believing people--that long to see a new heaven and a new earth, where there is peace, health, education, life and work for all, where the old people live long lives and the children do not die of common illnesses--are at stake.[58]

According to the Mexican bishops, the poor and believing people equated the fulfillment of the transition to democracy with the realization of a new heaven and a new earth. As some sectors of the church in Mexico are wont to do, the CEM has linked the concept of democratization to the complete transformation of society and to the construction of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. These concepts, as defined by the church, are practically synonymous. It is important to note that this passage began with the phrase, "For the poor and believing people," as if to say that this definition is particular to that group and may not be applicable for others. Few politicians or

[57]Ibid.

[58]Alvarez, "Cristianos," 20.

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business people, although at least peripherally concerned with the welfare of their constituents, are openly in pursuit of a new heaven and a new earth. Thus this way of defining democracy may, in the end, demobilize the poor and believing people since procedural democracy simply cannot measure up to the expectations created by the religious rhetoric, and in order to complete the democratization process economic development, strong parties and viable state institutions are needed. And/or the church's rhetoric may fulfill a prophetic function, acting as a conscience, pushing the political system to at least attempt to respond to the needs of the poor. In other words the church may help redefine democracy in a way that reflects the desires and needs of the people.

Although they did advocate a purpose definition of democracy, the CEM's statement staunchly called for procedural democracy as well. In their conclusion, the bishops presented a number of claims which confirm that voting was a Christian obligation but the church could not be a partisan institution. They explained:

> No political party . . . can claim to represent all Christians. On the contrary, the Gospel can inspire diverse political options. The vote must be personal, secret and free. All citizens must defend their right to vote, respect that of others and be vigilant against possible abuses of authority. It is good that diverse political options exist. When one party takes the role as the only guide, [the system] degenerates into totalitarianism and corruption.[59]

The argument for a non-partisan church is rhetorically sound, but as was noted in the discussion of the Finca Wololchán land takeover, Father Padrón's arrest, and the Xi'Nich march, this policy is not always adhered to or even tenable. If the church criticizes the government which has been controlled by the same political party since 1929, as the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas has done, it is difficult to maintain a non-partisan stance.

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[59]Elecciones, 23.

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Citizen's Movement for Democracy

Following massive electoral fraud in the central Mexican state of San Luis Potosí in August 1991, the Citizen's Movement for Democracy was founded. The group's second national encounter was held in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, February 28 through March 1, 1992. Representatives from more than forty organizations, including different political parties, human rights organizations, non-governmental organizations, religious and environmental groups, feminists, intellectuals, writers "and others interested in promoting and restoring democracy in a peaceful manner in this country" attended the meeting.[60]

Responding to increased authoritarianism employed by the government to address large scale national unrest, a popular mobilization, including groups such as the MCD, emerged in Mexico. One analyst noted that although the presence of this mobilization was not new, the unity of actors was distinct:

> These movements, which have always existed as isolated fragments in Mexico, are now showing themselves with an efficiency and power of social convocation that finally permits a glimpse of the fragility of the authoritarian system.[61]

Events such as the pilgrimage to urge the liberation of Father Joel and the Xi'Nich march to Mexico City were said to have galvanized participants, convincing them that their coordinated actions could be effective and triumphant. Mexicans, in large numbers, were beginning to view democracy--which the MCD defined as a political system in which society and the nation guarantee the alternation of power through free, fair and just elections, and respect universally recognized human rights--as the "essential instrument" which could trigger "national renovation and the social and economic reconstruction of the country." In this context reclaiming the vote from "the

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[60]Onésimo Hidalgo, "El estado de Chiapas convertido en un polvorín," *Encuentros* 7 (marzo-abril 1992): 41.

[61]"Llamamiento: movimiento ciudadano por la democracia, II Encuentro Nacional. San Cristóbal, Chiapas, 28-29 febrero 1992," *estudios ecuménicos* (abril-junio 1992): 2.

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fraudulent hands of the regime" inspired civic rebirth throughout the country. There was a subtle distinction between the way the CEM and the MCD defined democracy. For the MCD, democracy was linked with, but not equivalent to social transformation. Securing a democratic political system was the first step toward resolving a myriad of problems facing the nation.[62]

Christians in general, and in the Diocese of San Cristóbal in particular, played an important role in the MCD. In conjunction with the February 1992 MCD meeting, a Christian call for democracy was issued. The call asserted that neoliberalism was "anti-popular and anti-democratic" and democracy was the only way for civil society to confront short and long term challenges. "The lack of political and social democracy," the call went on, "is our principal problem today; to encourage it is the great and common work."[63] This statement called on Christians to embrace their role as citizens, and churches to be active participants in civil society. But, like the CEM statement, it was quick to point out that the church was not monolithic, and thus Christians "did not conform to a specific social space," but had an obligation to participate as some part of the whole. Nonetheless, the call noted, those Christians who have opted for the poor have emerged as "specific actors" and as such "have assumed intense social and political participation." Although this sector was not a majority within the church, the statement recognized that, "without a doubt their presence is an active social force, growing and diverse, covering diverse popular civil and social spaces oriented to alternative and democratic advances."[64]

The broader context in which the church's 1992 call placed democracy is typical. Again, electoral politics is deemed a "necessary but not sufficient" component of democracy. According to the church's statement, Christians working for democracy

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[62]Ibid., 3. This argument is similar to that of Huntington discussed in Chapter One.
[63]Ibid., 5.
[64]Ibid., 6.

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sought a more just society, not only elections free of fraud. The two were inextricably connected but the latter was not enough to secure the former:

> Democracy does not establish a party program--a necessary but not sufficient condition to overcome the grave problems and social demands. Democracy is a large and open project which must be taken in hand by the citizens, procuring from it the growth of social and political conditions necessary for just development and the life of the people. Christians concur with democracy, simply from our lives, ethics and communitarian vocation, because it is a value and a human right.[65]

A 1993 gathering of the Christian arm of the MCD echoed many of the same sentiments. The members proclaimed, "In the face of the neoliberal, neoconservative and authoritarian offensive which is currently imposing itself on Mexico and other Latin American countries . . . only democracy offers the opportunity for popular and national alternatives and identities."[66] Their message took on a sense of urgency as they looked toward the August 1994 presidential election. They acknowledged that Christians were distinct from "social sectors" such as campesinos, wage earners or urban popular organizations, concluding that Christians "are actors with a specific identity in the processes [earned] by committing themselves to their faith."[67]

Faith and Democracy

The period prior to the 1994 presidential election was recognized as an important historical juncture, one in which the church could play a key role and one for which the church had a responsibility to prepare its constituents. The church sought to contribute to this key moment in the democratization process by engaging in a number of popular education initiatives. The church in Chiapas was ideally suited for this task

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[65]Ibid., 7.

[66]"'Por una ética y una cultura para el cambio democrático'--Llamamiento Nacional a la Participación de los Cristianos a la Lucha por la Democracia," *CENCOS* (noviembre 1993): 2.

[67]Ibid., 3.

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since it already possessed many of the necessary resources: Catechetical networks were used to publicize events and secure leadership and participants. Buildings, curricula and expertise were all readily available to the church. One such curriculum, entitled *Para Preparar La Coyuntura de 1994*, includes an assessment of the Salinas Administration, Mexico's economic crisis, "the evolution of opposition parties and democratic forces," and five potential political scenarios. It concludes with a paper presented on the first anniversary of the death of Sergio Méndez Arceo, suggesting some activities such as: citizen education, electoral observation, a grand mobilization and conscientization of citizens before the 1994 elections. This book points again to the problem of partisanship. Although no party receives an endorsement, the first two chapters describing the Salinas Administration and the current economic crisis amount to tacit denunciations of the PRI. Another booklet, a collection of Lenten meditations, focused on the need to participate in the electoral process--*Democracia y vida digna para todos: homilías cuaresmales 1994*. Noting past electoral abuses, Bishop Ruiz wrote in this collection that he understood, but did not accept, the people's apathy. He admonished Christians to consider civic responsibilities as religious obligations.[68] Contributors to the collection Luciano Uribe and Manuel Velázquez H. described the moment in Mexico as "a true *Kairos,*" pointing out that in addition to pivotal elections, Mexico had to face "the discovery that peace in the country which had been considered established was only an illusion."[69] These and other similar materials were readily available and widely used throughout the diocese.

One of the popular education courses offered in the diocese was based on the curriculum, *Faith and Democracy*. This course was presented in Yajalón and a number of other parishes. The course manual discussed democratic participation, generally including a consideration of the CEM document; the question what is politics?, the role

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[68] Secretariado de Acción Social, A.C. *Democracia y vida digna para todos: homilías cuaresmales 1994* (Mexico D.F.: Secretariado de Acción Social, A.C., 1994), 3.

[69] Ibid., 6. Kairos means a time of opportunity.

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of government in relation to the people and political parties; an analysis of elections and politics in the time of Jesus and in the upcoming elections, in particular including how to cast a vote; who's who at the polling place; and types of fraud. The quest for dignity and equality were said to be the fundamental motivation for participation in the political system.[70]

[70]Secretariado de Pastoral Social, *Temas de Reflexion, Fe y Democracia* (Diocesis de Leon, Guanajuato. Enlace, Comunicacion, y Capacitacion, A.C., Mexico, 1994), 9-11.

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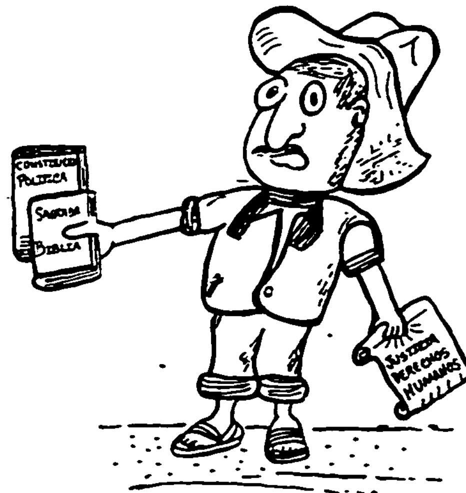
In a typical exercise, participants were shown drawings of:

DON CHON ABSTENCION

DON ARMANDO TRAMPAS

DON MARIO NETA

DON JUSTINO DERECHO



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They would discuss the characteristics of the first three, then would be asked if they knew people like that or perhaps had some of those traits themselves.

> *Don Chon Abstencion* (abstention) is not interested in politics, which he considers a dirty subject, so he doesn't want to get involved; he says religion shouldn't be mixed up in politics, and is never going to vote.
>
> *Don Armando Trampas* (armed with fraud) enters politics in support of the candidate who will most benefit him, without concern for the community.
>
> *Don Mario Neta* (marionette) gets involved in politics but lets himself be manipulated. He believes everything he sees on television and is enchanted by smooth talk and promises, and changes his mind often.

Then the group would be presented with the drawing of *Don Justino Derecho* and told:

> *Don Justino Derecho* ("just rights") gets involved in politics because he cares about his community. He wants to change things he thinks are wrong and he knows to do this he must be involved. He wants a better life for his children. His faith motivates him to struggle and commit himself. He likes to read and study. He studies all the parties and doesn't believe all they say but judges them with his own criteria.

The leader would then ask, "Did *Justino* come to this workshop?" And generally the participants would heartily affirm his presence. Using exercises like this, the church sought to encourage committed Christians to adopt political participation as an expression of their faith. They were taught that faith and politics must be mixed.[71]

The Presidential Election, 1994

Considerable hope was placed by the church in the process and outcome of the 1994 presidential election. In the aftermath of the Zapatista uprising, the attention of the world had become focused on the injustices and corruption of the ruling party and

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[71]Ibid., 27-38.

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the system which had kept it in power. The political culture of Mexico appeared open to change.

Workshops on democracy and elections were also sponsored by the diocese to increase awareness of, and participation in, the upcoming elections. These two-day events were attended by catequistas and held in various locations throughout the diocese. They would generally begin with a discussion of the definition of politics--"how decisions are made"--and then proceed to consider the assertion that "to participate in politics is the right of all people."[72] When the group in the May 13-14, 1994, course was asked what it meant to participate in politics in their community, they responded, "To make decisions for the good of the community, to work for the good of all," or "To become aware of the reality we live in, the poverty, the hunger, the sickness, etc., and look for a way to overcome these necessities." And only when pushed did they mention, "To elect our authorities and representatives."[73]

At this point the course leader introduced Article 39 of the Mexican Constitution which states: "National sovereignty resides essentially and originally in the people. All public power, all authority and all government is born from the people. The people have at all times the inviolable right to alter or change the form of their government." And democracy was defined as, "the people are the government."[74] This definition raises difficulties with expectations similar to those addressed earlier in this chapter. These courses were an interesting combination of extensive, abstract discussions which reached conclusions like "democracy means the people are the government" and extremely technical reviews of electoral procedures.

The course held on June 24-25 followed the same structure. The course's objective: "To reflect on the importance of participation in the construction of

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[72]This assertion is derived from Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Mexico signed, claiming all people have a right to participate in the government of their country.

[73]"Taller de Democracia y Elecciones documento," (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Diócesis de San Cristóbal, 13-14 mayo 1994), 2-3, photocopied.

[74]Ibid., 4.

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democracy and in particular in the elections on August 21, 1994" was written on newsprint and taped to the front wall of the seminary chapel where the course was held. The course began with the question, "Does anyone need translation during the meeting?" A quarter, or twenty-five of the nearly one hundred catequistas gathered, raised their hands. The workshop was translated from Spanish into Tzotzil. One catequista asked if printed materials would be provided since many of them wrote very slowly. It was agreed that printed materials would be provided.

The participants brought with them a Mayan sense of democracy. Theirs was essentially a community-centered, rather than an individual-centered, democracy. The religious worker leading the workshop raised questions such as:

> What is democracy? What is politics? What does it mean for us that the government is born from the people? In Mexico is the government of the people?

He then divided the catequistas into small groups to discuss their responses. After talking for some time, the small groups reconvened to share their thoughts:

> Politics is the search for unity in the communities, participation in the communities. . . . There is democracy if there is liberty, justice. . . . The government is born of the people but it manipulates them. . . . The Mexican government is not born of the people because it practices fraud. The government is elected by the rich for the rich. . . . Democracy is when there is participation of all of the community, when we have the word. . . . If there is no participation, there is no democracy.

The group considered other issues such as:

> Who has the right to vote? How do you vote?
>
> *Why do we have to vote alone? If we are electing people to serve the community, shouldn't the community decide together?* [emphasis added][75]

These questions pointed to the profound differences in political realities, which somehow had to be reconciled before Mexico could become a democratic society.

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[75]Author's observation of the *Taller de Democracia y Elecciones*, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, 24-25 June 1994.

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During the courses on democracy and elections, the participants discussed how the Mexican political system works, how to secure a voting credential, how to register candidates, how to set up voting booths, how to cast a ballot and how to count the votes.

This dichotomy of the church providing technical information about electoral procedures and urging the faithful to participate in the electoral process while encouraging hopes that democracy would eradicate all injustice was reflected again and again in the diocese. The activities in San Cristóbal de Las Casas on August 20, the day before the elections, captured this incongruence. In the Church of Santo Domingo a nine hour prayer vigil was sponsored by the diocese. The purpose of this gathering was "to ask God our father with the power of his spirit to help us to do his will." The announcement of the vigil began, "The father, present in our life, calls us to collaborate in the construction of the Kingdom of God. In the next elections, he calls us so that, with our vote, we will help with this construction, which is the dignified life for all." Meanwhile in a hotel across the street from the Santo Domingo Church, the diocesan staff was briefing electoral observers and foreign visitors on the technicalities of the Mexican electoral system.

At the close of the 1994 election political scientists Jonathan Fox and Luis Hernández concluded, "Mexico escaped the worldwide wave of democratization one more time."[76] Nonetheless voter turnout was the largest in Mexican history, reaching more than seventy-seven percent.[77] The government-controlled PRI held power, but earned the smallest margin of victory in its sixty-five year history, capturing only 50.18 percent of the vote. The conservative PAN, which popularized the slogan "A Mexico without lies" and whose presidential candidate Diego Fernández de Cevallos,

[76]It is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyze the outcome of the 1994 presidential and gubernatorial election. What follows are a few essential highlights. Jonathan Fox and Luis Hernández, "Lessons from the Mexican Elections," *Dissent* (Winter 1995): 29.

[77]Dean Peerman, "Poll Watching in Chiapas," *Christian Century* (16 November 1994): 1081.

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was considered by most to have been the winner of Mexico's first-ever televised presidential debates, garnered 27 percent of the vote. The PRD candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, from whom many believe the 1988 presidential election was stolen through fraud, suffering from the lack of a clear political program, managed to secure only 17 percent of the vote. United States Ambassador James Jones proclaimed the election "a milestone in Mexico's progress in political reform and democratization," but others, concurring with Fox and Hernández, recalled historian Lorenzo Meyer's 1991 observation that "Mexicans do not live but only imagine democracy."[78]

Fox and Hernández offer a number of possible explanations for the PRI's victory. The opposition was divided and, they observed, "In no 'founding election' in a transition to democracy has a divided opposition won over entrenched authoritarian incumbents." Another potential explanation, one advocated by many Mexican analysts, is the "fear vote hypothesis." Fear, the argument goes, was present on a macro and micro level. In the former, the population feared that instability--in the form of the EZLN, political assassins, or disgruntled foreign investors--would follow a non-PRI victory. With so much uncertainty in the country, voters did not believe this was the time for a governmental change. On the micro level, voters feared the consequences they would suffer personally for siding with the opposition.[79]

In most cases the PRI's margin of victory was such that the fear vote and various irregularities reported by electoral observers were not sufficient to have changed the outcome of the election. The one possible exception was the governor's race in Chiapas.[80] The opposition candidate, Amado Avendaño, had a large following. A journalist and a public interest lawyer, his human rights work with the indigenous community had earned him the trust of the church, the Zapatistas and much of Chiapas'

[78]Ibid.

[79]Jonathan Fox and Luis Hernández, "Lessons from the Mexican Elections," *Dissent* (Winter 1995): 30.

[80]Chiapas was the only state where the gubernatorial election coincided with the presidential election.

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indigenous population. Avendaño ran on the PRD ticket. The PRI gubernatorial candidate won 50 percent of the vote, while Avendaño secured 35 percent (twice the percentage of PRD presidential candidate, Cárdenas). As the government's negotiations with the EZLN continued, many wondered if "the 1994 governor's race [might have been] a historic missed opportunity for peaceful political change in Mexico's most authoritarian region."[81] Amado Avendaño Figueroa issued a "Manifesto" on September 4, 1994, to the people of Chiapas, the people of Mexico and the international community, claiming that he was the true victor of the governor's race and any other governor was illegal and illegitimate, and calling for a period of civil resistance during the month of September.

On the day after the elections, August 22, 1994, Bishop Ruiz addressed the group of international visitors who had come to Chiapas to observe the election. He explained that the election was historic for a number of reasons: he, as a member of the clergy, had for the first time the legal right to cast a vote; and the civil society had reached a new level of awareness and responsibility. Ruiz told those sixty visitors that civil society had changed:

> . . . an ant was going up a wall and I saw this ant and I pushed him away. He fell to the floor, and then he started to go up again, so twice, three times, four times, five times, I did the same thing. And this ant came again to go up. Finally the seventh time he desisted and he went away to other places. So was the civil society of Mexico, once, twice three times, four times with courage to go ahead; finally it was impossible. We will wait for some time in history; sometime will come. We had the strength but not the hope. We had the will but not the organization or the discipline. We had lost the courage to hope. And finally when the voice of the Indian came, the civil society woke up . . .[82]

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[81] Fox and Hernández, 32.

[82] Samuel Ruiz Garcia, taped lecture. Santo Domingo Hotel, San Cristóbal del Las Casas, Chiapas (22 August 1994) 12 noon.

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One visitor asked the bishop if he thought the elections had been fair. Ruiz said, "I don't know. I have no way of knowing. . . ." But the bishop offered this advice to those who were trying so hard to understand what the elections meant. He explained:

> We can check in every corner and see what was not going according to the position of justice and denounce those things. And perhaps in that way we lost in the overall process in the country. Or we can see only the successes--the participation and the support--omitting the wrong that was done. We must check both things. Both things count. . . .[83]

Though numerous observers have drawn even more numerous lessons from the 1994 election, Fox and Hernández's conclusion is particularly relevant to a discussion of the church and democratization:

> Finally, the election revealed a gaping political chasm between the intelligentsia and much of the electorate. Across the spectrum, Mexico City elites were surprised at the PRI's high margin of victory. In the aftermath of organized civil society's successful veto of the government's military response to the Chiapas rebellion, expectations of change were high. Many pro-democracy activists--mostly urban middle-class--felt predestined to win, and then the people let them down.[84]

Although some indigenous communities provided solid opposition victories, many of the diocesan leadership who spearheaded popular education initiatives throughout the diocese were stunned by the PRI's success. Perhaps those who taught the courses had forgotten the lesson that elections, while key, were not the only component of the transition to democracy. The majority of their "students," on the other hand, had taken to heart the notion that "Democracy is a process, a culture which is learned with *time and practice. . . .*"[85]

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[83]Ibid.
[84]Fox and Hernández, 32.
[85]Pérez-Rayón, 62.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion: "Bartolomé Now Is Us"

Throughout Mexican history the relationship between religion and politics has been tumultuous. The Mexican Catholic church helped give birth to an independent Mexican state. During much of the nineteenth century the church enjoyed an intimate relationship with conservatives who sought to safeguard its position of economic and political privilege. The backlash produced by this position of privilege left the church bereft of any legal status by the early part of the twentieth century. The challenges of Vatican II and Medellín helped encourage the Mexican church to reconsider its role in the political arena. This resulted in division: some within the church worked on behalf of elements of Mexican society which had been denied privilege while others sought to reestablish the church's privileged position. In Chiapas, much of the leadership of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas has been unambiguously aligned with the former throughout the period under consideration in this study (1960-1994).

For more than thirty years the political role of the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas has been expanding. Some social scientists have argued that the influence of the church in Latin America has diminished (James C. Cavendish) and that it no longer commands a key place in the political maelstrom that is Chiapas (Philip Russell, George Collier). This study challenges those claims, although certainly since 1960, the church's role has changed.

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This changing role stems in part from three internal changes in the diocese itself. First, with the expansion of the role of the catequistas, the laity moved to a more central position in the church. Second, indigenous cultures, once viewed by the church as an obstacle to progress, became something to be valued, protected and defended. The Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas goes so far as to claim to be an indigenous church. Third, the church accepted responsibility as a political actor. The bishop, and many of the priests and the catequistas became reconciled to their political role and adopted the goal of democratization.

Following the EZLN, uprising the church was the only institution which had the trust and respect of the indigenous people necessary to mediate that conflict; the government reluctantly agreed to permit the church to play that role. In the elections later that same year the church was asked by Alianza Cívica to coordinate the electoral observation for the state of Chiapas. These activities were carried out by a church committed to democratic procedures and which by this point claimed a very powerful lay presence. Other popular organizations had entered the political picture; the political arena in Chiapas had expanded. The church's influence did not fade as new peasant organizations and political parties formed. The church remains a key actor, making a distinct contribution to the political process.

Many studies of the political role of the church in Latin America have focused on Christian base communities. This study is unique in that it examines the conversion of a change-oriented theology into politics in an area of Latin America where catequistas, not

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Christian base communities, are the primary mechanism of that conversion. Catequistas have played a prominent role in other areas of Latin America, including Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, and Bolivia, but this role has not received much scholarly attention.

In the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, catequistas have come to the fore as a primary source of political power. Working mainly in rural indigenous communities, the catequistas have in many cases evolved from religious educators to local political leaders. The catequistas' new role was precipitated by the resettlement of the selva, which led to a mixing of indigenous cultures and a need to replace traditional community structures with new structures; geographic isolation, linguistic isolation and cultural diversity, which made local indigenous lay leadership necessary; and the consistent presence of a highly politicized bishop and group of priests. Bishop Samuel Ruiz García is the only progressive bishop from the Vatican II/Medellín period still serving in Mexico.

The work of the catequistas was assisted by the development of a semi-independent lay network. This network is highly decentralized so the bishop, priests and religious may not always be able to direct or control the catequistas' work. The dynamism of the laity has increased, as is demonstrated by the pilgrimage to Tuxtla Gutiérrez to demand the release of Father Padrón, the Xi'Nich march to Mexico City and the response of Pueblo Creyente to the bishop's 1993 pastoral letter. Any consideration of the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas must take into account the presence of a highly influential laity.

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The catequistas have found ways to translate the diocese's progressive theological rationale into a commitment to building democratic life in Chiapas. The church encouraged democratization by providing an arena in which experiences of contestation and participation were not only accepted, but expected.

In spite of the unusual character and structure of the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, there are a number of conclusions to be drawn from this study which are applicable to the larger question: What are some of the roles which the church and other religious institutions play in democratization? These involve the visibility of the church as a political target, the theological basis for political action and the longevity of the church as an institution. These characteristics are unique to religious institutions.

First, the visibility of the church makes it vulnerable to political scapegoating. When a church or other religious institution chooses to act politically, it is more open to attack than other members of civil society. There are several reasons for this. Religious institutions, and churches in particular, often hold a pivotal place in society. Their buildings are centrally located and easily identifiable. Their leaders are often well-known and public figures; they appear at regularly scheduled public gatherings (weekly and daily masses, for example). Community organizations and even political parties may be able to maintain low profiles when a given political situation becomes volatile. This is more difficult for the church, even if the political role it has accepted is minimal.

In the thirty-four year period covered by this study, the church was continually singled out by the government for attack. Recent examples of government antipathy

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abound: the 1980 aftermath of the takeover of the Finca Wololchán, the arrest of Father Joel Padrón, and the Zapatista uprising. In each of these instances, the church had been playing a comparatively minor role. Accusations directed against the church by the government in the course of each incident caused the people involved to turn to the church for assistance and solidarity. In each case the church ended up in an expanded political role.

A second consideration in assessing the church's political role is its staying power. Numerous organizations and political parties have come and gone in Chiapas over the period of this study. The church has been in the region since the time of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Certainly its influence at any particular moment waxes and wanes due to a myriad of factors, but its presence is a constant.

Third, the faith commitment of its members is the characteristic which distinguishes the church from all other actors in the political arena. Thus the church's primary influence on the democratization process in Chiapas has been the construction of a theological rationale for political participation. This rationale is based on five assumptions: Poverty and suffering are not consonant with the will of God. Poverty and suffering may lead to conversion. Change is possible through the power of the Resurrection. The church is a catalyst for the construction of the Kingdom of God. The church is called to accompany the poor in their religious and political struggle.

This theological rationale encourages political activity which may be beyond the rational. As was discussed in Chapter Three, for example, the Resurrection is a powerful motivational image precisely because it is irrational. Although this characteristic makes

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studying the church's political role problematic for political scientists, it is impossible to understand the church's role in the democratization process without examining the theological foundation upon which the church in constructed.

Finally, the different definitions and expectations of democracy may present a dilemma for those analyzing the role of religious institutions in the democratization process. Religion often deals with the ideal, rather than the real. When the church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas spoke of democracy as the coming of the Kingdom of God, it may have been playing an important motivational and mobilizing role for change. But the church is not a political party. It cannot create political change. It can inspire people, but it cannot empower them in any overtly political sense.

Do divergent definitions demobilize the poor and believing people since procedural democracy cannot possibly measure up to what religious rhetoric has led them to expect? Perhaps. Still, the church fulfills a prophetic function, helping to redefine democracy in a way that addresses the desires and the needs of the people it serves.

In the absence of meaningful political alternatives, the church can fill a political void. It can give people hope that change is possible. It can inspire and motivate, but the church cannot effectively fulfill the expectations it helps to create. It can participate in the process of democratization, but political parties and political institutions are required to complete the process.

In determining the impact of the Catholic church on the democratization process in Mexico we must first consider the meaning of democratization in the Mexican context. Surely it is a wide-ranging process including many forms of resistance to the status quo

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which has governed Mexico over the past sixty-five years. In addition, the process of democratization encompasses a range of popular efforts to organize the disenfranchised elements of Mexican society to participate in their political future. And, in the past decade, it has begun to include contested and semi-contested elections. The democratization process in Mexico is under way.

In the part of Chiapas included in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the Catholic church has played an active role in this complex democratization process. Although distancing itself (at times unsuccessfully) from partisan politics, it has lent prestige, support and legitimacy to efforts to broaden the scope of politics of Chiapas and provide meaningful alternatives to the PRI. The church, through its catequistas, has worked in literally thousands of small indigenous communities throughout Chiapas to encourage political participation. Church leaders have served as independent observers and evaluators of electoral reform.

The church is, in some ways, exempt from some of the normal confines of political activity. The church is operating in an almost extra-political realm and thus, should it serve its purposes, can remain prophetic in its goals and vague in its criticism of and alternatives to the political system. This is not to say that the words or activities of the church have less impact. Quite the contrary, at times the nebulous nature of its arguments and activities works to its benefit, and the church is able to galvanize a broad spectrum of people in a way that would be difficult, if not impossible, for a secular organization. This point is demonstrated by the pilgrimage of the Pueblo Creyente

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organized to protest the arrest of Father Joel Padrón of Simojovel in 1991. No political party or secular popular organization has managed to approach this level of participation.

Clearly the Catholic church in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas has chosen to minister to the needs of the people of the diocese in a concrete and tangible--some would say political--manner. Were "activists shielded in religion" behind the 1994 uprising? The work of the church, as demonstrated by the events discussed in this study, has had political ramifications. But the work has been neither secretive nor deceptive, as the phrase "shielded in religion" would suggest. On the contrary, the bishop, as well as many of the priests, religious and catequistas openly acknowledge their efforts on behalf of the poor. The events and movements described above, along with countless others, demonstrate not political activists using religion, but rather a church coming to terms with political action as a way to respond to the struggles and needs of its people. The work of the church in this diocese addresses key issues, such as the struggle for land and needs and aspirations of indigenous people and the poor.

The Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas is committed to a theological rationale for political change. The work of the Catholic church in Chiapas has helped create fertile ground for the seeds of democratization. How the church participates in the current pursuit of democracy is a question that cannot be answered by studying a single diocese or even a single state. Reverberations triggered by the Zapatista uprising were felt around the country and around the world. Clearly the quest of the people of Chiapas for democracy did not commence nor conclude on January 1, 1994. It has its roots in struggles which began generations earlier, struggles in which sectors of the church have

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participated, and in which sectors of the church, responding to political, economic and theological aspirations, will continue to participate.

The democratization process is long and slow. At times it may not seem much progress is being made. A church with a well-developed theological rationale for political activity is an ideal agent for precisely this type of work. The mission of the church is not validated by its achievement of specific goals in this world. The church, unlike a political party, does not need to win elections and, unlike a labor union, does not need to negotiate a good contract. The church must preach its gospel and provide sustenance to the faithful who make it a church. These acts can contribute to the building of democratic life. They can be ways of creating the organizations, the mechanisms and the citizens that are needed to sustain a vital democracy.

A commitment to political democratization in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas has gone hand in hand with a commitment to create an environment in which the indigenous people could establish themselves as responsible, independent leaders, and achieve some degree of power. The church empowered indigenous people, providing an organizational and ideological base from which to challenge the political system or at least enter the political arena.

At the final meeting of the church-sponsored Indigenous Congress in 1977 President Morales asked, "Now, who will be Bartolomé, the new Bartolomé? Will there be one? No brothers, Bartolomé now is us, is our communities, is the united indigenous

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communities, yes only like this can we have force. "[1] To paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, the government shall be upon their shoulders.

[1] Jesús Morales Bermúdez, "El congreso indígena de Chiapas: un testimonio," *Anuario* 1991 (México, D.F.: Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura, 1992): 262.

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Appendix I
GLOSSARY

bases diocesanas	diocesan bases
basismo	populist message which puts people at the base first (David Lehmann)
cabeceras municipales	seats of municipal or departmental government
caciques	local or regional political boss
campesino	"country person" or peasant
campo	rural countryside
cargo	a burden, or responsibility, undertaken on behalf of the community
catequista	catechist
colonia(s)	colony or settlement
compañeros	companions or comrades
criollo	Mexican-born Spaniards
curia	ecclesiastical offices
ejido	village common land; since 1915 communities established through land reform
el trabajo vetebral	the vertebral work, centerpiece
encomienda	a grant to a landholder of indigenous people and their villages who were under obligation to pay tribute and give labor to the landholder (encomendero)
fiesta(s)	feast or celebration
finca(s)	"farm," ranch, hacienda, estate
finquero(s)	farmer, rancher, hacendado, landowner
folklórico	folkloristic
frente zapatista	Zapatista Front
internado	boarding school
latifundista	owner of a large landed estate; absentee landlord
mestizo	person of mixed Spanish-Indian ancestry; ladino
milpa	maize field
municipio	municipality
parroquia	parish
prediaconos	pre-deacons
pueblo(s)	town or village
responsables	political authorities of a community
selva	forest or jungle

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Appendix II
ABBREVIATIONS

CDHFBC	Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center
CDLI	Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Liberty
CEB	Christian base community/ base ecclesial community
CELAM	Latin American Episcopal Council
CEM	Mexican Episcopal Conference
CIOAC	Independent Confederation of Agricultural Workers and Peasants
CNC	National Peasant Confederation
CNDH	National Human Rights Commission
CNPA	National Coordinating Committee "Plan de Ayala"
CRIACH	Regional Council of Indigenous Representatives of the Highlands of Chiapas
EZLN	Zapatista National Liberation Army
INI	National Indianist Institute
LP	Línea Proletariat
MCD	Citizen's Movement for Democracy
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
OCEZ	Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization
PAN	National Action Party
PNR	National Revolution Party
PP	Popular Politics
PRD	Party of the Democratic Revolution
PRI	Party of the Institutional Revolution
PRODESCH	Office of Socio-Economic Development of the State of Chiapas
PST	Social Workers Party
UCISECH	Union of Indigenous Communities of the Selva of Chiapas

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Appendix III

(a) MAP OF CHIAPAS
(b) MAP OF THE DIOCESE OF SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

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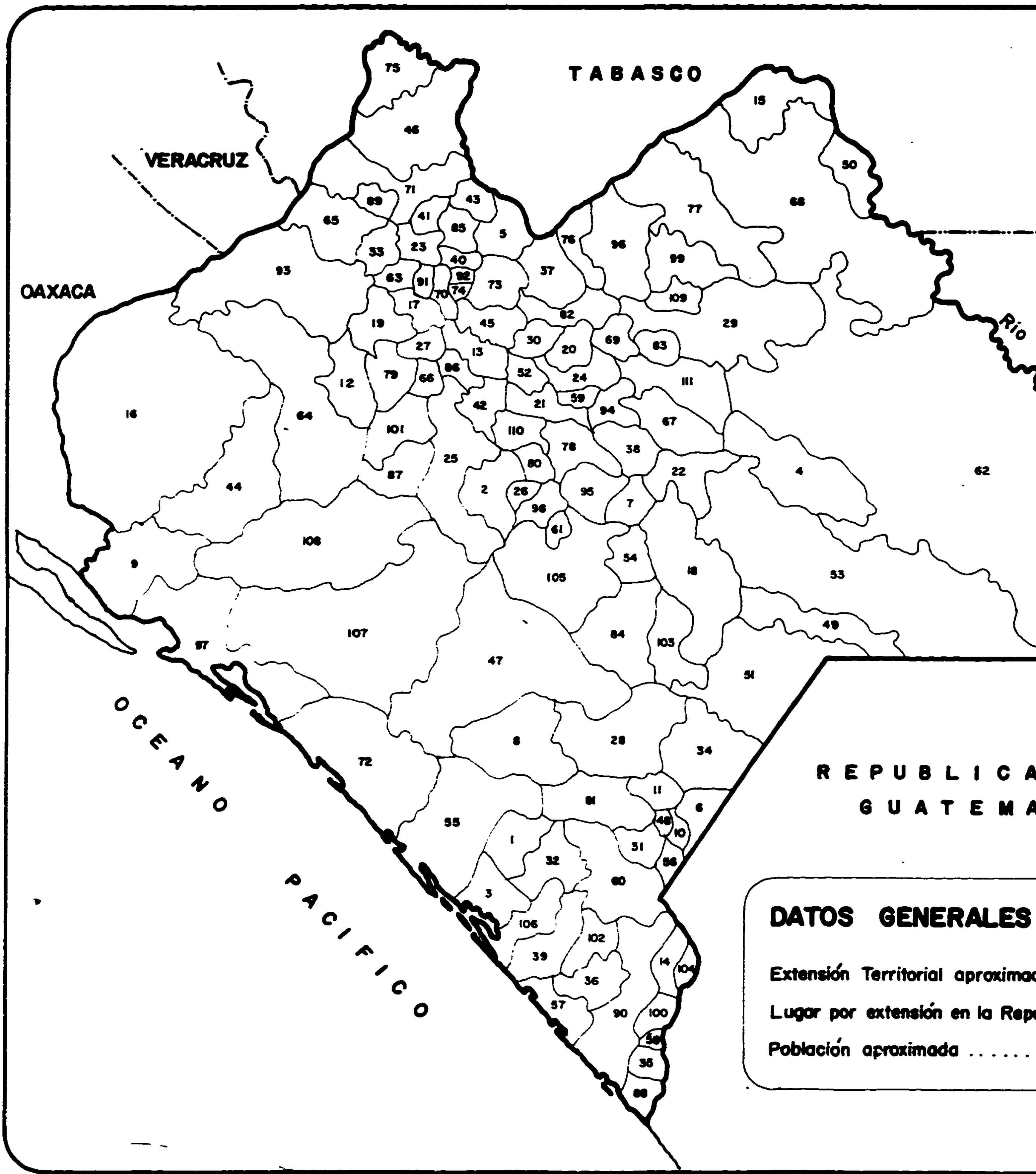

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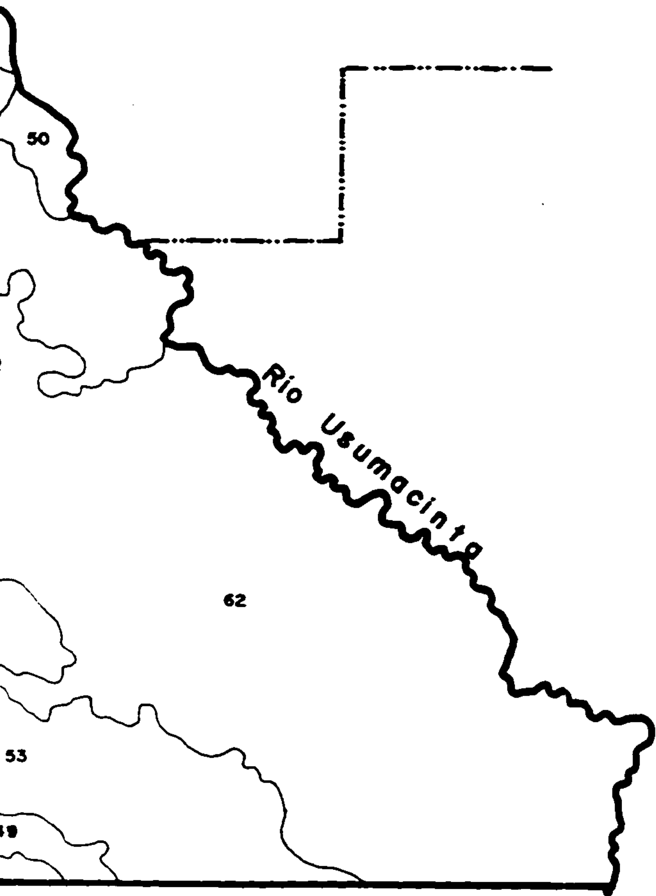

1.- ACACOYAGUA
2.- ACALA
3.- ACAPETAHUA
4.- ALTAMIRANO
5.- AMATAN
6.- AMATENANGO DE LA FRA.
7.- AMATENANGO DEL VALLE
8.- ANGEL ALBINO CORZO
9.- ARRIAGA
10.- BEJUCAL DE OCAMPO
11.- BELLA VISTA
12.- BERRIOZABAL
13.- BOCHIL
14.- CACAHOATAN
15.- CATAZAJA
16.- CINTALAPA
17.- COAPILLA
18.- COMITAN DE DOMINGUEZ
19.- COPAINALA
20.- CHALCHIHUITAN
21.- CHAMULA
22.- CHANAL
23.- CHAPULTENANGO
24.- CHENALHO
25.- CHIAPA DE CORZO
26.- CHIAPILLA
27.- CHICOASEN
28.- CHICOMUSELO
29.- CHILON
30.- EL BOSQUE
31.- EL PORVENIR
32.- ESCUINTLA
33.- FRANCISCO LEON
34.- FRONTERA COMALAPA
35.- FRONTERA HIDALGO
36.- HUEHUETAN
37.- HUITIUPAN
38.- HUIXTAN
39.- HUIXTLA
40.- IXHUATAN
41.- IXTACOMITAN
42.- IXTAPA
43.- IXTAPANGAJOYA
44.- JIQUIPILAS
45.- JITOTOL
46.- JUAREZ
47.- LA CONCORDIA
48.- LA GRANDEZA
49.- LA INDEPENDENCIA
50.- LA LIBERTAD
51.- LA TRINITARIA
52.- LARRAINZAR
53.- LAS MARGARITAS
54.- LAS ROSAS
55.- MAPASTEPEC
56.- MAZAPA DE MADERO
57.- MAZATAN
58.- METAPA
59.- MITONTIC
60.- MOTOZINTLA
61.- NICOLAS RUIZ
62.- OCOSINGO
63.- OCOTEPEC
64.- OCOZOCOAUTLA DE E.
65.- OSTUACAN
66.- OSUMACINTA
67.- OXCHUC
68.- PALENQUE
69.- PANTELHO
70.- PANTEPEC
71.- PICHUCALCO
72.- PIJIJIAPAN
73.- P. NUEVO SOLISTAHUACAN
74.- RAYON
75.- REFORMA
76.- SABANILLA
77.- SALTO DE AGUA
78.- SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS C.
79.- SAN FERNANDO
80.- SAN LUCAS
81.- SILTEPEC
82.- SIMOJOVEL
83.- SITALA
84.- SOCOLTENANGO
85.- SOLOSUCHIAPA
86.- SOYALO
87.- SUCHIAPA
88.- SUCHIATE
89.- SUNUAPA
90.- TAPACHULA
91.- TAPALAPA
92.- TAPILULA
93.- TECPATAN
94.- TENEJAPA
95.- TEOPISCA
96.- TILA
97.- TONALA
98.- TOTOLAPA
99.- TUMBALA
100.- TUXTLA CHICO
101.- TUXTLA GUTIERREZ
102.- TUZANTAN
103.- TZIMOL
104.- UNION JUAREZ
105.- VENUSTIANO CARRANZA
106.- VILLA COMALTITLAN
107.- VILLA CORZO
108.- VILLAFLORES
109.- YAJALON
110.- ZINACANTAN
111.- SAN JUAN CANCUC

EPUBLICA DE
GUATEMALA

OS GENERALES DE CHIAPAS

ión Territorial aproximada .... 75000 Km.^{2}

por extensión en la Republica .... Octavo

ón aproximada 3,000,000

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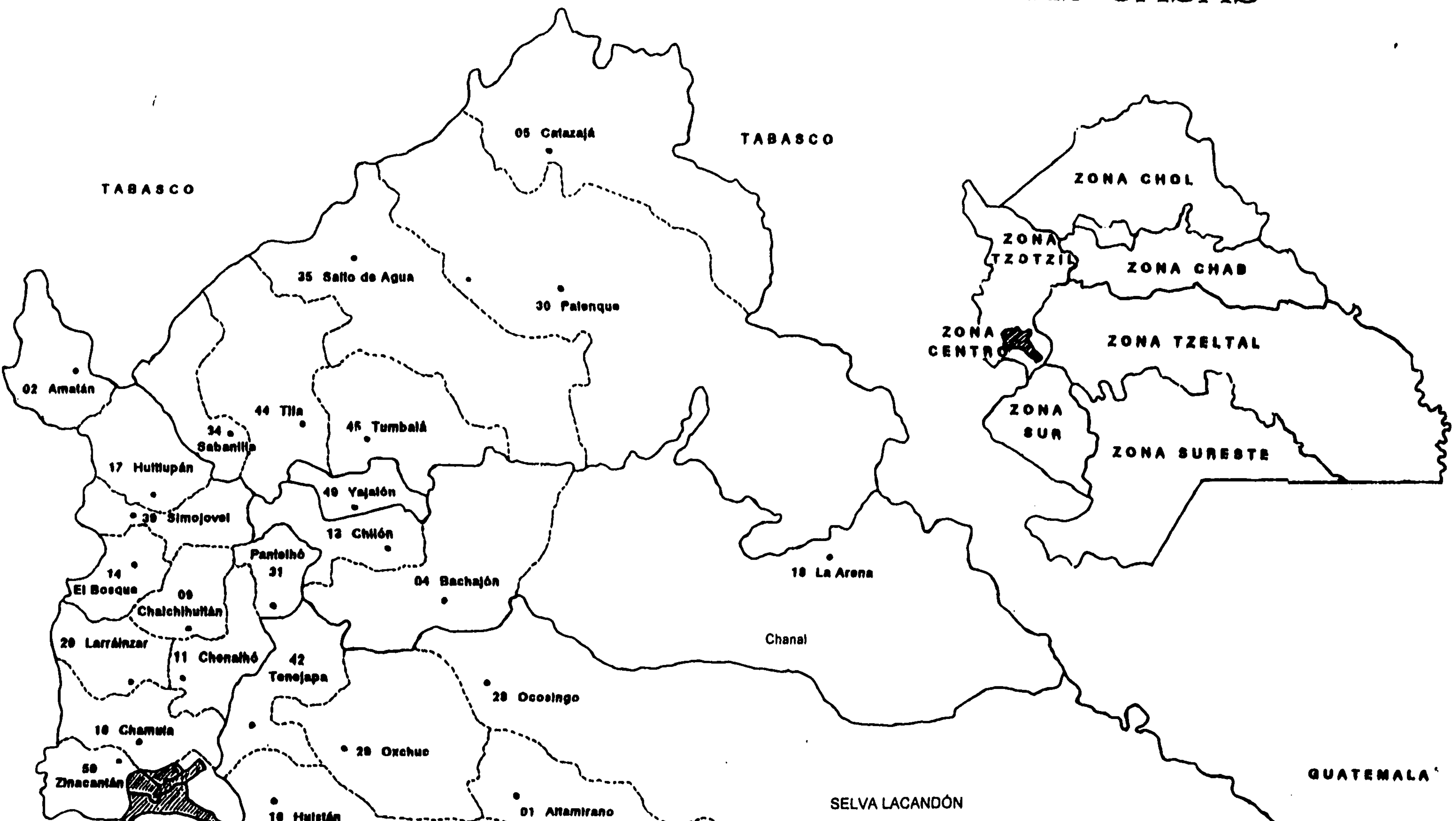
DIOCESIS DE SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS



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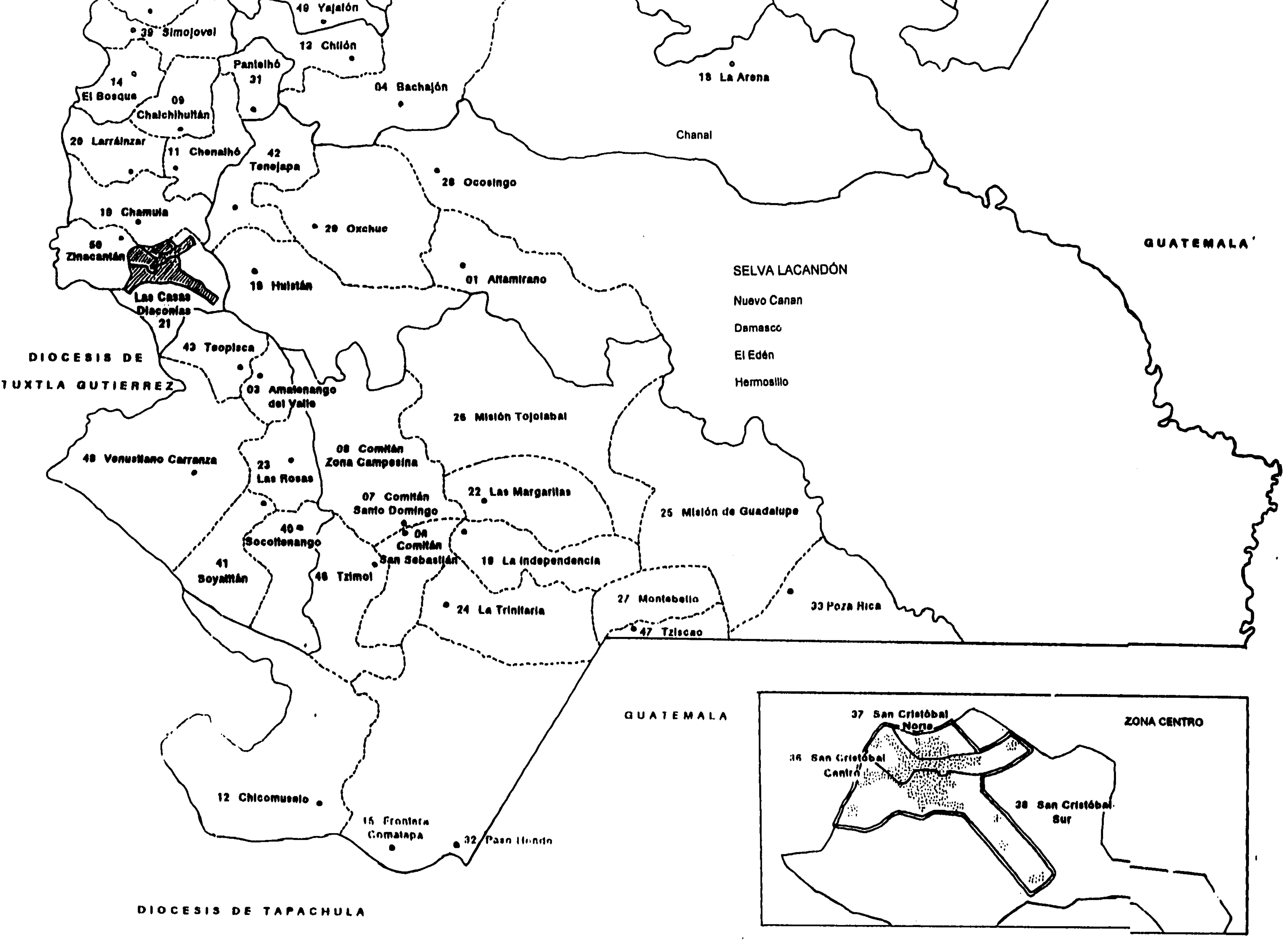

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