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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Carrying the Cross: Popular Christian Communities and Religious Protest during Pinochet's Dictatorship, 1973–90

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Abstract

This article examines the activities of Comunidades Cristianas Populares (Popular Christian Communities, CCPs) in marginalised neighbourhoods of Chile's capital, Santiago, during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship. It traces how the CCPs emerged, thrived and then stopped, to showcase the uneasy co-existence between liberationist practices espoused by popular sectors and traditional ecclesiastical paradigms until their breaking point in 1990. In doing so, I argue that religious ritual is an important form of social protest against authoritarianism. Public processions exposed tensions between the Church and state, within the Church's diverse constituents, as well as between Christian community members and left-wing party militants. In the late 1980s, as the Church increasingly retreated from liberation theology, the dictatorship successfully co-opted social organisations and rendered religious rituals largely ineffective as a form of social protest.

Keywords: Chile; Christian communities; dictatorship; grassroots organising; liberation theology; urban space

Introduction

During Holy Week in 1980, the newly formed Coordinadora (Coordinating Committee) of the Comunidades Cristianas Populares (Popular Christian Communities, or CCPs) organised its first public Via Crucis procession amid the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Gathering at the Recoleta Franciscana Church in the northern zone of Santiago – Chile's capital – 800 participants ended the commemoration of Jesus' path to crucifixion and resurrection at the Patio 29 of the General Cemetery.[1] A mass grave containing unidentified remains of the

[1] Aníbal Pastor Niñez, 'Vía Crucis Popular', April 1990, Centro Ecuménico Diego de Medellín Archive [hereafter cited as CEDM], Coordinadora de Comunidades Cristianas Populares [hereafter CCCP]. This is

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detained-disappeared, the Patio 29, along with the discovery of human remains in the ovens of Lonquén mines in 1978, cemented evidence of the Pinochet regime's human-rights violations.[2] By 1981, the Coordinadora mobilised 2,500 participants in its second Via Crucis in the western zone of the capital. Organised in columns by deaneries representing each zone, participants held up banners with quotes from liberation theology texts. To the anonymous author of the clandestine magazine *Policarpo*, the Via Crucis served as 'public testimony of a terrible truth: Jesus is today crucified in Santiago, among the poor, on a permanent Holy Friday'.[3] Public processions such as these imbricated religion with everyday life and politics throughout the dictatorship's tenure.

Composed of a group of social leaders with diverse grassroots experiences, the Coordinadora of the CCPs is a key protagonist in linking quotidian struggles to national historical conjunctures. As such, it fomented local participation by organising workshops, commemorative events, Marian pilgrimages and Via Crucis processions from 1980 to 1990. I argue that grassroots CCPs during the Pinochet regime transformed religious rituals into a powerful form of social protest as processions mapped human-rights abuses in public, although state-controlled, urban spaces. The significance of the CCPs and their embrace of liberation theology stems from three factors. First, they formed the backbone of religious dissent against the dictatorship. Second, they resonated deeply with the lived experiences of the urban poor. Third, they provided a means through which to contest authoritarianism by bringing together a heterodox social movement that effectively combined religion and politics and was for a time unencumbered by rigid partisanship. As historian Camilo Trumper has shown, the politics of the street was central in fashioning a sense of urban citizenship during the Popular Unity government (1970–3) and in the dictatorship's attempts at erasing the militancy of that era.[4] Building on his insights, I show that CCPs created a public space of dissent at a time when it was surveilled, policed and altogether prohibited. To do so, I bring together two disparate bodies of scholarship: religious scholars' work on ritual and historians' studies on social movements and the struggle for human rights and democracy.

Scholars of religious studies emphasise the spatial elements of procession. The founder of ritual studies, Ronald Grimes, defines a procession as 'a ritualistic movement through space', one that 'links different spatial orders, for instance, civil and

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an uncatalogued archive. The 1980 Via Crucis is included in this document as part of the Coordinadora's organising trajectory and announcement of its 1990 Via Crucis procession. The 1980 Via Crucis is also mentioned in David Fernández Fernández, *La 'Iglesia' que resistió a Pinochet: Historia, desde la fuente oral, del Chile que no puede olvidarse* (Madrid: Iepala, 1996), p. 257; and Alison J. Bruey, 'Transnational Concepts, Local Contexts: Solidarity at the Grassroots in Pinochet's Chile', in Jessica Stites Mor (ed.), *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity in Cold War Latin America* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), p. 121. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[2]On Lonquén, see Chapter 2 in Ángeles Donoso Macaya, *The Insubordination of Photography: Documentary Practices under Chile's Dictatorship* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2020).

[3]No author, 'Una peregrinación distinta: Viernes Santo de las comunidades cristianas populares de Santiago', *Policarpo*, 1: 1 (1981), p. 16.

[4]Camilo Trumper, *Ephemeral Histories: Public Art, Politics, and the Struggle for the Streets in Chile* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

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sacred or urban and rural space'.[5] For the Via Crucis, recent works have argued that this procession not only collapses distinctions between the secular world and the sacred time of Christ but also mediates 'an encounter with God that transcends limiting distinctions like those between religious experience and political activism'.[6] In identifying the poor with Jesus, the Via Crucis performed an idealised future and, in so doing, fostered critical consciousness that re-oriented activities in the present. For sociologist of religion David Smilde, the very 'publicness' of ritual is an important 'source of its power'.[7] Revising older conceptions of ritual as reflecting existing social hierarchies, he shows that 'rituals create cultural discourses, beliefs, and practices that might not have existed in the same way before'.[8]

This article contributes to a growing field of scholarship that decentres the role of institutions and institutional actors in favour of the grassroots dimensions of the struggle for human rights and democracy.[9] Historian Alison Bruey, for instance, argues that intersecting leftist and Catholic political cultures at the local level gave rise to a broad notion of the language of rights from which opposition to Pinochet grew.[10] Drawing on pre-coup organising, this type of inter-generational grassroots work from 1973 to 1978 made possible the explosive cycles of public national protests against the regime from 1983 to 1986.[11] I build on these important insights, but focus on the social geography of the Coordinadora's grassroots activities, which have not received in-depth analysis.[12] The cartographic elements of the

[5]See Ronald L. Grimes, *Symbol and Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), p. 62; and 'Procession', in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 1, respectively.

[6]On Via Crucis processions linking the secular and sacred realms, see Karen Mary Davalos, '"The Real Way of Praying": The Via Crucis, *Mexicano* Sacred Space, and the Architecture of Domination', in Timothy Matovina (ed.), *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 41–68; and Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), especially p. 74. On Via Crucis as mediation, see Timothy Matovina, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 146.

[7]David Smilde, 'Public Rituals and Political Positioning: Venezuelan Evangelicals and the Chávez Government', in Martin Lindhardt (ed.), *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians* (New York: Berghahn, 2011), p. 311.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 310.

[9]These works focus primarily on the work of the Vicariate of Solidarity and of Archbishop Raúl Silva Henríquez. See Viviana Bravo Vargas, 'Iglesia liberadora, rearticulación de la política y protesta social en Chile (1973–1989)', *Historia Crítica*, 62 (Oct.–Dec. 2016), pp. 77–96; Hugo Cancino Troncoso, *Chile, iglesia y dictadura 1973–1989: Un estudio sobre el rol político de la Iglesia Católica y el conflicto con el régimen militar* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997); Pamela Lowden, *Moral Opposition to Authoritarian Rule in Chile, 1973–90* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Mario Aguilar, 'Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, the Catholic Church, and the Pinochet Regime, 1973–1980: Public Responses to a National Security State', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 89: 4 (2003), pp. 712–31.

[10]Alison J. Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty: Grassroots Activism and Human Rights in Pinochet's Chile* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).

[11]*Ibid.*; Manuel Bastías Saavedra, *Sociedad civil en dictadura: Relaciones transnacionales, organizaciones y socialización política en Chile* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2013).

[12]Both Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*, and Fernández Fernández, *La 'Iglesia' que resistió a Pinochet*, mention the Via Crucis and the CCPs but neither provides an exhaustive analysis of their marches and spatial dimensions.

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processions reveal changing power struggles between Church and state, within the Church's diverse constituents, as well as between Christian community members and left-wing party militants. Religious rituals transformed ordinary spaces, such as street corners, parishes and garbage dumps, into important sites of popular struggle. At the end of the 1980s, the relentless attempts by political party elites to co-opt social organisations and the increasingly unfavourable climate for liberation theology resulting from the Vatican's geopolitical shift to the right would lead to the end of the Coordinadora in 1991 and of a decade of massive processions in Santiago's urban periphery.

This article relies primarily on the uncatalogued and largely unused archive of the Coordinadora housed in the Diego de Medellín Ecumenical Centre. These sources make it possible to trace the Coordinadora's trajectory by critically examining internal minutes, yearly activities and correspondence between grassroots leaders, the Church hierarchy and political parties. Oral interviews and published testimonies, combined with oppositional and mainstream press coverage, reveal the personal and collective stakes in popular sector organising against authoritarianism. Marking the specific places of each processual route in both promotional materials and as participants physically marched through various shantytown communities was critical for the Coordinadora. By doing so, the Coordinadora amplified the meaning of local struggles and ensured they would not remain on the sidelines of national political debates. The article thus maps the 1982, 1987 and 1990 Via Crucis processions to track how the CCPs waxed and waned during the dictatorship and the transition to democracy. By 1982, the processions appeared widely in the press and catapulted the Coordinadora into the national sphere for the first time. The combined effects of the economic crisis, the resurgence of political elites, and attacks on liberation theology threatened the Coordinadora's existence as reflected in its 1987 procession. These tensions ultimately reached a breaking point as Chile transitioned to democracy and embarked on a process of reconciliation and consensus-building starting in 1990, the year of the last public Via Crucis organised by the Coordinadora. Tracking these processions across the decade tells us as much about the internal politics of the Coordinadora as it does about the changing role of grassroots organising in Chile's transition to democratic rule.

Becoming a 'Church of Martyrs'

Christian communities in popular sectors embraced the tenets of liberation theology and organised public processions that raised consciousness about human-rights abuses throughout the dictatorship's tenure. Their very name, however, and especially the use of the descriptive term 'popular', generated confusion and tension among different Catholic sectors and within the institutional Church hierarchy. Christian base communities emerged in Chile as they did throughout Latin America in response to the second conference of the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Latin American Episcopal Council, CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia in 1968. CCPs are one type of Christian base community, but whose territorial insertion in *poblaciones* (shantytowns), and by extension social commitment to building the Kingdom of God in the contemporary moment, structured

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their sense of identity and praxis.[13] Inspired by the CELAM conference in Puebla, Mexico in 1979, and the Popular Church of Nicaragua, CCPs in Chile identified with the poor and with the everyday structural inequalities, violence and suffering they themselves witnessed. In practising these liberationist orientations, CCPs prioritised the participation of the laity.

Given the spread of CCPs in *poblaciones* throughout Santiago following the coup d'état of 1973, *pobladores* (inhabitants of *poblaciones*) and priests formed the Coordinadora in 1979, a territorial organisation integrating and orienting nearly 300 CCPs in the capital.[14] Following the Vicariate of Solidarity's model of zonal departments, the Coordinadora grouped the CCPs into four geographic zones, each corresponding to the communities' location in the northern, southern, eastern and western parts of Santiago. The Coordinadora's makeup was primarily lay, but included priests with long-term participation in poor, urban neighbourhoods, and the guidance of lay theologian Fernando Castillo Lagarrigue. The Coordinadora saw religious and political activities as part of the same struggle, but it did not explicitly align itself with any one left-wing party. Most members of the Coordinadora were lay *pobladores* with long histories in Catholic Action movements, such as the Juventud Obrera Católica (Catholic Youth Worker, JOC) and the Movimiento Obrero de Acción Católica (Catholic Action Worker Movement, MOAC).[15] Allies of the Coordinadora and participants in its public activities, however, held a variety of ideological positions, including clandestine membership in left-wing parties, such as the Izquierda Cristiana (Christian Left, IC) and Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR), among others. The Coordinadora thus walked a fine line and embraced a broad conception of politics, but one intimately rooted in their faith.

Since the 1950s, Catholic Action activists and the availability of foreign priests increased Church presence in factories, *poblaciones* and schools in Chile.[16] This physical proximity and the ensuing affective ties between pastoral agents and everyday people would transform grassroots organisations during the dictatorship. Precursors to the ideas of Vatican II already existed in Chile and throughout Latin America, but the Vatican and later Medellín provided the necessary institutional backing.[17] The creation of the geographically structured General Mission in

[13]Alison J. Bruey further explains that Christian base communities in Chile 'designate organizational structure, not theological or political orientation' and that some within that structure 'called themselves Popular Christian Communities'. See Alison J. Bruey, 'Transnational Concepts, Local Contexts: Solidarity at the Grassroots in Pinochet's Chile', in Stites Mor (ed.), *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity*, p. 138, footnote 6.

[14]See 'Jornada de evaluación y proyección de la Coordinadora de Comunidades Cristianas Populares: ¿Qué es la Coordinadora de CCP?', July 1987, CEDM, CCCP. For a sense of the theological underpinnings of the *comunidades*, see Fernando Castillo Lagarrigue, *Iglesia liberadora y política* (Santiago: Educación y Comunicaciones, 1986).

[15]For a comprehensive history of the JOC, see Tracey Lynn Jaffe, 'In the Footsteps of *Cristo Obrero*: Chile's Young Catholic Workers Movement in the Neighborhood, Factory, and Family, 1946–1974', PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009.

[16]Michael Fleet and Brian H. Smith, *The Catholic Church and Democracy in Chile and Peru* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 46–7.

[17]Sol Serrano and Luz María Díaz de Valdés, 'Catholic Mobilization and Chilean Revolutions, 1957–1989', in Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Timothy Matovina and Robert A. Orsi (eds.), *Catholics in*

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1963 helped form Christian communities and increased lay participation in Bible circles in rural, coastal and urban zones.[18] Renovating trends within the Catholic Church intensified during the short-lived Salvador Allende government (1970–3). During its tenure, Cristianos por el Socialismo (Christians for Socialism, CpS) advocated convergence between Christianity and Marxism, inciting condemnation from conservative sectors.[19] At the same time, the Grupo Calama (Calama Group) urged priests and sisters to live in *poblaciones*, take up working-class jobs and, together with the poor, build a Popular Church.[20]

Cold War regional developments and Catholic progressive activity in the 1960s and early 1970s are critical in comprehending the shifting socio-political and religious dynamics from which the CCPs would actively draw. State terror following the coup targeted democratic forms of participation and networks of solidarity. Detentions, tortures and disappearances of leftists, union organisers and students became widespread state strategies to reshape the social and political body. Pinochet attacked left-leaning Catholics to not only restructure the Church but also reclaim the historical narrative of Chile as a Christian nation in the wake of communist encroachment. Pinochet, as Kirsten Weld has shown, sought to 'frame himself as a soldier in a larger holy war' against Marxist subversion and atheism.[21] Expelling foreign priests, detaining Chilean ones and threatening religious and lay Catholics in close contact with labour unions and political parties became part of the broader strategy of cleansing undesirable elements from the nation.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Christian communities tied to parishes and chapels organised children's meal programmes, unemployed pools and health programmes to provide economic assistance to persecuted and unemployed leftists.[22] The Vicariate of Solidarity institutionalised these grassroots organisations in 1976 through the formation of zonal departments. From 1973–6, grassroots organisations multiplied, sustained by the shared efforts of leftists and non-leftist Catholics and non-Catholics. Chilean historian Manuel Bastías Saavedra has shown that by 1978, 'protest in Chile became increasingly systematic, cohesive,

the Vatican II Era: Local Histories of a Global Event (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 159–79.

[18] *Ibid.*; and Fernández Fernández, *La 'Iglesia' que resistió a Pinochet*.

[19] 'Comunicado a la prensa de los sacerdotes participantes en las jornadas "Participación de los Cristianos en la Construcción del Socialismo in Chile"', *Mensaje*, 20: 198 (1971), p. 176. See also Luz María Díaz de Valdés, 'Blessing the Revolution: Leftist Christians in Chile, 1957–1973', PhD diss., Tufts University, 2018.

[20] Jesuit José Aldunate, who joined the Calama Group, recounted its history in 'La experiencia Calama', in José Aldunate Lyon *et al.* (eds.), *Crónicas de una Iglesia Liberadora* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2000), pp. 89–92. For a history of the foundational roles of friars Jan Caminada and Guy Boulanger in forming Grupo Calama, see Yves Carrier, *Teología práctica de liberación en el Chile de Salvador Allende: Guy Boulanger, Jan Caminada y el equipo Calama: Una experiencia de inserción en el medio obrero* (Santiago: Ceibo Ediciones, 2014).

[21] Kirsten Weld, 'The Spanish Civil War and the Construction of a Reactionary Historical Consciousness in Augusto Pinochet's Chile', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 98: 1 (2018), p. 78. See also Humberto Lagos Schuffeneger, *El general Pinochet y el mesianismo político* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2001).

[22] The first *comedor infantil* was organised in the *población* Herminda de la Victoria on 4 Nov. 1973. See Bastías Saavedra, *Sociedad civil en dictadura*, p. 97.

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and based on organised efforts' and, just as importantly, more public.[23] The support the Vicariate provided grassroots organisations would not have been possible without the existence of the CCPs, whose dedication to liberation empowered members to engage in diverse and interconnected activities despite the challenges posed by repression. Worker-priests of the Calama Group organised Equipos Misión Obrera (Workers' Mission Teams, EMOs), attracting religious sisters and laypersons in fomenting CCPs and spreading the tenets of liberation theology. For instance, friars Mariano Puga and Roberto Bolton, both in EMOs, lived in *poblaciones*, participated in CCPs, joined the Coordinadora and penned articles for the clandestine magazine *No Podemos Callar,* and its successor *Policarpo.*[24] The dictatorship, according to Puga, forced them to create 'a clandestine Church, a persecuted Church, a Church of martyrs'.[25] Religious rituals, such as pilgrimages and local Via Crucis processions, became commonplace avenues for dissent.

Efforts to share organising tactics, spread news of political repression amidst media censorship and centralise individual CCPs emerged as grassroots organisations expanded. Under the auspices of the Vicaría de Pastoral Obrera (Vicariate of Workers' Pastoral), 90 representatives from 30 CCPs of the northern, southern, eastern and western zones of Santiago first gathered from 2 to 4 September 1977.[26] At this gathering, participants confronted three central themes. First, they classified the heterogeneity of existing CCPs, differentiating between communities engaged in mutual aid, assistance or consciousness-raising activities, and those explicitly embracing social and political commitments. Second, participants addressed the challenges the CCPs faced, as fear of reprisal prevented people from joining. Third, they took up the thorny question of politics and concluded that 'the prophetic attitude of the Church effects power and is political'.[27] They agreed to develop educational initiatives that combined the theory of liberation theology with practice in the formation of liberationist communities. At the 1978 meeting, participation increased to 164 representatives from 51 CCPs. The vast majority, 123 participants, identified as lay. In the plenary document following the gathering, representatives referenced Medellín and Puebla as inspiration for the construction of a Popular Church in Chile, one emanating from and with the poor.[28]

Since its inception in 1979 until it disbanded in 1991, the Coordinadora faced constant tensions resulting from global, regional and national-level conflicts. After the CELAM conference in Puebla, the Vatican mounted pressure to reign

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 192. Both Bastías Saavedra and Bruey provide a valuable corrective to the existing historiography that has overlooked the grassroots networks that laid the groundwork for the national protests beginning in 1983. See Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*, p. 13.

[24]On EMOs, see José Aldunate, 'EMO: Presencia y acción en 25 años', in Aldunate *et al.* (eds.), *Crónicas de una Iglesia Liberadora*, pp. 93–9. On the clandestine magazine *No Podemos Callar* and its continuation as *Policarpo*, see Martín Bernales Odino and Marcos Fernández Labbé (eds.), *No Podemos Callar: Catolicismo, espacio público y oposición política, Chile 1975–1981* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2020).

[25]Recorded video interview with Mariano Puga, 9 Oct. 2016, Archivo Oral Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi, DVD no. 187, disk no. 2.

[26]'Jornada Comunidades Cristianas Populares', 2–4 Sept. 1977, CEDM, CCCP.

[27]*Ibid.*

[28]Vicaría de Pastoral Obrera, 'Jornada de Comunidades Cristianas Populares: Material de trabajo exclusivo para participantes en la jornada', 10–12 Nov. 1978, CEDM, CCCP.

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in Christian base communities and liberation theology.[29] Within CELAM, the conservative faction gained momentum after 1972 with the election of conservative Archbishop of Colombia Alfonso López Trujillo, who advocated for a return to the spiritual dimensions of faith.[30] As political repression and increased conservative pressure intensified in Chile, the Vicariate underwent internal restructuring by 1976 by reducing the number of sponsored programmes, and rejecting judicial cases that involved defending leftists accused of armed activity.[31] At this critical conjuncture of intersecting national and regional shifts to the right within the Catholic Church, the Coordinadora uneasily positioned itself as an autonomous representative of committed CCPs.

Several activities marked the organisational calendar of the Coordinadora. From 1980, CCPs commemorated the life and death of Salvadorean Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero every 24 March, celebrated Pinochet-era martyrs in the September Eucharist, and trekked up the San Cristobal hill every December in a Marian pilgrimage. Yearly meetings allowed members to spread news, analyse national and regional occurrences, and plan popular education workshops to guide individual communities. The Via Crucis processions grew to become the largest and most public of these practices. The Via Crucis was primarily a popular form of religiosity drawing from people's lived experiences and reflecting popular aspirations for a life free of economic, political and social repression. 'The dominant ideology and the preaching of parish priests and missionaries encouraged patience, promising a heaven of happiness after this life', argued authors of *Policarpo*, whereas 'the message of the Via Crucis is different. If Christ suffers with the people, it is because he shows solidarity in their struggle.'[32] Organisers were keenly aware of the symbolism and messages of protest embodied in the Via Crucis. In connecting present-day suffering to Jesus' crucifixion, processions created a framework to marshal community involvement, overcome fear and denounce the regime's human-rights violations.

Organisers of the Via Crucis procession creatively adapted this traditional Catholic ritual, consisting of 14 stations, to their immediate needs. They condensed the stations to four, aligning with the four geographically structured deaneries. The theme of each Via Crucis and the location of each procession was a bottom-up decision. Representatives of each CCP collectively decided on the most salient issues and each zone of the CCPs was responsible for one of the four stations, organising testimonials, liturgical readings and theatrical performances that linked local concerns to that year's theme. For Irene Morales, a former member of the Coordinadora, the Via Crucis served as a space through which to 'denounce' regime excesses and 'announce' a collective path to liberation.[33] As the organising body of this public ritual act, the Coordinadora was embroiled in tense relationships with bishops. For former executive secretary Sergio Cárdenas, this conflict stemmed in large part from 'fear within

[29] Penny Lernoux, 'The Long Path to Puebla', in John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (eds.), *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), pp. 3–27.

[30] Edward L. Cleary, *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), pp. 45–7.

[31] Bastías Saavedra, *Sociedad civil en dictadura*, pp. 128–9.

[32] 'El viernes santo de las comunidades de base', *Policarpo*, 2: 18 (1983), p. 5.

[33] Interview with Irene Cambias (previously Rojas Morales), who had served on the Coordinadora of CCPs, Santiago, Chile, 17 June 2019.

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the hierarchy that this [the Coordinadora] would become a parallel Church'.[34] The Coordinadora, according to Cárdenas, 'appeared as a strange thing, one that was not part of the official pastoral structure of the Church of Santiago'.[35] Although the Coordinadora developed amicable and often close ties with *individual* bishops, the hierarchy grew suspicious of its existence, and especially of its proclaimed autonomy of lay activity. Despite these tensions, bonds of solidarity between priests, sisters, lay Catholics and leftists, forged before the coup and during anti-dictatorial struggle, sustained the Coordinadora's work for over ten years.

The Via Crucis of 1982

Starting in 1980, Via Crucis processions moved beyond the Church's largely controllable and restricted vicinity of the parish and into a larger urban space. In doing so, processions entered an already charged public sphere and sought to reclaim urban space from the regime's domain.[36] This shift coincided with the return to Chile of previously exiled theologian Fernando Castillo, who subsequently became the official advisor of the CCPs. Sergio Torres, Chilean theologian and former member of CpS, also returned to Chile that year and co-founded the Diego de Medellín Ecumenical Centre, an important site for intellectual production on liberation theology and pastoral training.[37]

The 1982 Via Crucis was unique, given the severity of the global economic crisis that belied Pinochet's claims of a robust economy. It was also the first Via Crucis procession to garner the attention of national media. The words 'Christ is crucified in the working class', etched onto an enormous wooden cross towering at the front of the procession, stood out to journalists and onlookers gathered on Holy Friday in 1982.[38] Approximately 3,000 people from the CCPs participated in that year's pilgrimage. Simultaneous processions took place throughout Chile, including in southern cities of Concepción and Lota.[39] It was perhaps one of the riskiest public demonstrations to take place that year; it came on the heels of the 25 February 1982 assassination and subsequent beheading of Tucapel Jiménez, trade unionist, director of the Asociación Nacional de Empleados Fiscales (National Association of Fiscal Employees, ANEF) and known regime opponent. In choosing a labour theme, the Via Crucis organisers critiqued state-sanctioned violence. Alfonso Baeza, the vicar of the Workers' Pastoral, led the Santiago procession as it wove through working-class neighbourhoods of the capital, and stated in an interview

[34]Interview with Sergio Cárdenas, former executive secretary of the Coordinadora of the CCPs, and currently the director of the Department of Comunidades in the Archbishopric of Santiago, Santiago, 6 July 2022.

[35]*Ibid.*

[36]On the making of a highly charged public sphere in Chile during the Allende government, see Trumper, *Ephemeral Histories*.

[37]On both Fernando Castillo's and Sergio Torres' return to Chile, see Aldunate *et al.*, *Crónicas de una Iglesia Liberadora*, pp. 47–8; Interview with Sergio Torres, Santiago, 16 May 2017, during which he discussed his participation in CpS, his subsequent exile to the United States, and return to Chile in 1980.

[38]'Via Crucis obrero en zona industrial de la capital', *La Tercera*, 10 April 1982.

[39]On union organising in this area, see Luis Ortega, 'La frontera carbonífera 1840–1900, *Revista Mapocho*, 31: 1 (1991), pp. 131–48; and Marian Schlotterbeck, *Beyond the Vanguard: Everyday Revolutionaries in Allende's Chile* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

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with *La Tercera* that 'we make Puebla's teachings our own and we recognise the suffering of Christ in the faces of workers, unemployed, and organisations that cannot function'.[40] The gathering point, the procession route and the endpoint of the Stations of the Cross were carefully planned to reflect the year's theme.

The physical route of the procession materialised the discursive link between the cross borne by Christ and that carried by Chilean workers. Following several years of aggressive neoliberal restructuring, by 1982 Chile descended into an economic crisis whose severity matched that of the global economic crisis of the 1930s.[41] Economic adjustments disproportionately impacted working-class and poor sectors, who experienced unemployment, a weakened labour movement and a lack of state-sponsored social services. In 1982, unemployment reached 30 per cent and real wages fell by 11 per cent from 1979 to 1982.[42] The organisers of the Via Crucis understood the enormous strain of the 1982 crisis on their communities.[43] The Via Crucis of 1982 embodied the symbolic and physical places of the once militant industrial sectors that created a belt around Santiago. This symbolic gesture of solidarity with organised labour took on concrete dimensions as organisers gathered in the San Nicolás de Tolentino parish, located in the industrial sector of Carlos Valdovinos Avenue (see Figure 1). During Allende's government, the industries located around that avenue formed the San Joaquín Industrial Cordon, an expression of working-class militancy and 'people's power'.[44] The Via Crucis participants paid homage to the street's historic significance for the Chilean labour movement, and processants returned to the street that had once been a privileged site for labour demonstrations.

According to the announcement, the Via Crucis would end at the Sumar Industrial Union's premises. A textile manufacturing industry that had once occupied four large street blocks from Carlos Valdovinos Avenue to the north, all the way to El Pinar to the south, the Sumar textile industry was nationalised by the Allende government in 1971 (see Figure 1). The Sumar manufacturing plants were also blocks away from La Legua *población*, one of the few places, beyond the presidential palace, that engaged in armed resistance the day of the coup.[45]

Although the Coordinadora planned that the Via Crucis procession would end at the Sumar Union, participants' recollections and press accounts reveal that this was not ultimately the case. The procession ended at the chapel of the *población* Cruz Gana, located near the Estadio Nacional (National Stadium). Used as a place for mass detention and torture of political prisoners in the immediate aftermath of the coup, the National Stadium likely triggered memories of violent state repression. Historian Mario Garcés, who participated in the 1982 Via Crucis,

[40]'Via Crucis obrero en zona industrial de la capital', *La Tercera*, 10 April 1982.

[41]On the comparison of Chile's crisis to the Great Depression and on the negative impact the crisis had on different industrial sectors and on labour, see Peter Winn (ed.), *Victims of the Chilean Miracle: Workers and Neoliberalism in the Pinochet Era, 1973–2002* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

[42]*Ibid*., p. 41.

[43]'Convocatoria a Vía Crucis', 1982, CEDM, CCCP.

[44]Franck Gaudichaud, *Poder popular y cordones industriales: Testimonios sobre el movimiento popular urbano 1970–1973* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2004).

[45]Mario Garcés and Sebastián Leiva, *El golpe en La Legua: Los caminos de la historia y la memoria* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2005); and Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*, p. 41.

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Figure 1. Route of the 1982 Via Crucis Procession through the Industrial Sector of Southern Santiago
Source: Map created by geographer Jordan Blekking, based on information provided by the author from the Coordinadora de Comunidades Populares archive.

recalled a large police presence circling the procession once they reached Vicuña Mackenna Avenue, forcing organisers to respond to needs on the ground.[46] *Policarpo* published an article on the Via Crucis that included details on the

[46]Interview with Mario Garcés, Chilean historian and director of NGO Educación y Comunicaciones (ECO), Santiago, 4 July 2019.

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encounter with the police. According to the article, one officer walked the flank of the march and read aloud all the phrases on people's signs and placards into a walkie-talkie, 'surely communicating with one of his bosses on a mobile unit'.[47] It did not deter anyone, the article continued, as participants collectively sang in whispers, 'Listen, Father, to the cry of the people / Listen, Christ, come and save us.'[48] The encounter with the police must have been memorable, since both Garcés and Puga shared similar details of the event. Puga wrote about the exchange with the officer nearly verbatim and emphasised having responded to the officer's question about the political implications of the procession with the statement: 'Political was the death of Jesus as well. You know that those who killed him did so for politics because he uplifted the people.'[49]

Before the procession, participants received precise instructions through their CCPs to bring posters with quotes from the Bible, from the 1979 Puebla documents or Papal Encyclicals. All the signs abided by such prescriptions, but the expressions chosen had ambiguous meanings. For instance, one poster read: 'They have condemned the innocent and they have killed him because he could not defend himself (Santiago 5:6).'[50] Another stated, 'Do everything in order to make disappear the abyss that separates the few excessively rich, from the great multitudes of poor living in misery (Pope John Paul II).'[51] These statements, from biblical texts and religious authorities, served as public criticism of the Pinochet dictatorship for its human-rights abuses and growing economic inequalities. Linking contemporary suffering with biblical scripture reflected the influence of liberation theology's conception of unity in history.[52] For CCPs, public rituals denouncing repression were rooted in their faith, but for other participants, the Via Crucis provided an opportunity to make broader anti-regime pronouncements at a time when other avenues of dissent were closed.

The 1982 Via Crucis embraced the struggle of Chilean workers and their families who found themselves in a precarious position, while commemorating past struggles of working-class and labour militancy. In charting a path from an area of emblematic struggles for housing and union activism to one that signified state repression of that militancy – the National Stadium – the Via Crucis participants spatially traced the contemporary shifts in the nation's socio-economic and political landscape. In linking the suffering of Chilean workers to that of Christ and exalting the martyrdom of the 'Chilean people', the Via Crucis likewise traced continuity between sacred and historical time.

Popular Christian Communities and Political Parties

While, on 1 May 1982, the anonymous author of *Policarpo* lamented the lack of widespread labour demonstrations – arguing that 'fear, repression, the spectre of

[47]'Instantáneos del Viernes Santo: Un Via Crucis del pueblo', *Policarpo* 1: 9 (1982), p. 3.

[48]*Ibid.*, p. 4.

[49]Mariano Puga, 'La Via Crucis de las Comunidades Cristianas', in Aldunate *et al.*, *Crónicas de una iglesia liberadora*, p. 133.

[50]'Vía Crucis obrero en zona industrial de la capital', *La Tercera*, 10 April 1982.

[51]*Ibid.*

[52]Liberation theologians overcame distinctions between the 'supernatural' and 'natural' worlds, announcing that human salvation did not have to wait until the afterlife. See Cleary, *Crisis and Change*, p. 84.

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unemployment, and dismay have swept away the workers of what was always theirs on this date: the street' – by 11 May 1983, massive anti-dictatorship demonstrations rocked the capital.[53] Workers, youth, *pobladores*, women, and middle-class sectors returned to the streets en masse to demand regime change, and would continue to do so for the next three years. By 1983, parties of the Left were operating above ground and sought to take over the leadership of the protest movement.[54] Calls to participate in direct actions and to take up arms against the dictatorship attracted Chilean youth, especially from *poblaciones*.[55] In transforming the political landscape, the national protests uncovered latent tensions between leftists and Catholics, made the question of violence central to debates about the path to democracy, and challenged the CCPs to reconsider their role in popular sector organising.

As political recomposition of parties ensued, progressive Catholics worried that these discussions were leaving out popular sectors and they strongly affirmed that 'The nation cannot be rebuilt without the contribution of the popular [*lo popular*].'[56] By 1984, tensions intensified between the CCPs and left-wing militants. In an open letter following the 1984 Via Crucis, the Coordinadora condemned the actions of certain leftist groups, dubbing them 'childish' and 'immature' for co-opting the Via Crucis.[57] During the procession, left-wing militants had seemingly yelled out political slogans, distributed party leaflets and created political posters that did not abide by Via Crucis guidelines. The Coordinadora wrote: 'We cannot accept that Christian communities are seen only as a "space" for predetermined political tactics, or as a "sounding board" for slogans prefabricated elsewhere. We believe that the political dimension of the Popular Christian Communities is quite clear and that it is situated at another level that it is necessary to respect.'[58]

At stake for the CCPs was not only their autonomy from political party co-optation but also their conception of politics. The CCPs envisioned themselves as part of the popular movement and grew cautious of attempts to appropriate for party interests the spaces they had generated. Renowned Chilean theologian and Sacred Heart Congregation priest Ronaldo Muñoz argued that co-existence between believers, non-believers and socio-political organisations, though sometimes riddled with tensions, was 'necessary and fruitful'.[59] In Christian communities, he argued, people encountered an 'active, mobilising hope', one that superseded

[53]'Editorial: El Primero de Mayo', *Policarpo*, 1: 9 (1982), p. 1. On the May 1983 widespread protests against Pinochet, see María Olivia Mönckeberg, 'Más represión, más protesta', *Análisis*, 19 (July–Aug. 1983), pp. 13–15; María Olivia Mönckeberg and Patricia Collyer, 'La violencia vino de un lado', *Análisis*, 63 (Aug.–Sept. 1983), pp. 17–22; Patricia Collyer, 'Poblaciones: En el epicentro de la protesta', *Análisis*, 65 (Sept.–Oct. 1983), pp. 19–22.

[54]Bastías Saavedra, *Sociedad civil en dictadura*.

[55]The Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, the armed wing of the Communist Party, and the Lautaro Youth Movement of the Movimiento Acción Popular Unitaria formed in 1983. See *ibid.* and Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*.

[56]'Editorial: Nuestro horizonte político', *Policarpo*, 2: 18 (1983), p. 1.

[57]Coordinadora de Comunidades Cristianas Populares, 'Carta abierta dirigida a organizaciones populares y partidos políticos, posterior a la realización del Vía Crucis', 1984, CEDM, CCCP. Reproduced in *Pastoral Popular*, 35: 3 (1984), pp. 6–7.

[58]*Ibid.*

[59]Ronaldo Muñoz, 'Dejar a la iglesia ser iglesia', *Pastoral Popular*, 35: 3 (1984), p. 2.

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'any political project or utopia, because it is founded on the resurrection of the Crucified and open to the horizon of the future fullness of the Kingdom of God'.[60] Christian communities did not seek to supplant political parties, but they advocated for a politics primarily rooted in their faith.

For members of the Coordinadora, the presence of and unsanctioned actions by political party militants in Via Crucis processions were a source of anxiety. 'As long as we were a church', shared Irene Morales, '*pobladores* were calm and confident. But the parties appear and people are afraid of repression.' For Morales, it required 'courage to go out on the street and openly say things to the government', which is why in the Coordinadora 'we respected people's fear a lot'.[61] For Sonia Bravo, who served as executive secretary of the Coordinadora, members of political parties could always participate in the Via Crucis, but not 'with their political slogans'.[62] Neither Morales nor Bravo denied the implicit, and often explicit, political messages of their activities. Bravo went as far as to say that 'everything is political. People are political beings, even if I say "no to politics", that refusal is political.'[63] Members of the Coordinadora had a far more capacious understanding of politics, one that was not confined to the realm of political parties. In CCPs the conception of the political was informed by reading the Bible in light of everyday life, witnessing the plight of *pobladores*, giving testimony and denouncing oppression, and collaborating with both Christians and non-Christians. It was the structure and implied imposition by political parties they rejected.

By 1986, tensions between participants in CCPs and political party militants had escalated further, following infighting within the Left and the failed assassination attempt on Pinochet by the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez (Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front, FPMR).[64] The Coordinadora wrote a sombre evaluation of its own leadership to the CCPs, and while it took full responsibility for some of the shortcomings of the event, it likewise called out party elites for once again co-opting the space of the Via Crucis. In particular, the Coordinadora's letter called out militants from the MIR, the IC and, to a lesser extent, the Communist Youth. According to the Coordinadora, political groups sought to appropriate religious expressions and distort them as solely partisan ones. 'The political groups that we have named flooded the Via Crucis with pamphlets, shouted slogans, dedicated themselves to graffiti, murals, and even went as far as to verbally attack and threaten people from Christian communities who wanted to make an authentic Via Crucis.'[65] Puga, who gave opening remarks, affirmed the 'prophetic character' of the event, which for him implied clear political dimensions, but he warned that it was not a *partisan* event or an agitational opportunity.[66] The Coordinadora found itself in an increasingly difficult position. What the letter ultimately upheld

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[61] Interview with Irene Rojas Morales, who had served on the Coordinadora of the CCPs, Santiago, 17 June 2019.

[62] Interview with Sonia Bravo, Santiago, 29 June 2019.

[63] *Ibid.*

[64] Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*, p. 171.

[65] Coordinadora de Comunidades Cristianas Populares, 'Carta abierta a todas las comunidades cristianas de sectores populares', April 1986, CEDM, CCCP, p. 2.

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

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was that Christian communities and political parties disagreed on what constituted political activity. For the Coordinadora, the behaviour of political parties at the 1986 Via Crucis 'transform[ed] the communities and their actions into a field of dispute between different tendencies'.[67] In doing so, it threatened to cleave important networks of Catholics and leftists that CCPs had so carefully and consciously cultivated, channelling collective activities toward individual parties.

Liberation Theology under Siege

Given the growth of CCPs in Chile and their embrace of liberation theology, the Comisión Pastoral (Pastoral Commission, COP) of the Conferencia Episcopal de Chile (Chilean Episcopal Conference, CECh) organised a gathering in August 1982 to discuss the 'risks' that the CCPs posed.[68] In a patronising tone, the COP expressed fear that political parties were manipulating CCPs for their own interests. For them, CCPs could easily 'slip' from an authentic conception of the option for the poor to committing themselves to militant working-class struggles.[69] While recognising that CCPs did not want to construct a parallel church, the COP shared concern that CCPs were becoming too closely allied with liberation theology.[70]

At the root of their discomfort lay several factors. First, the CCPs' desired communion and autonomy threatened the Church hierarchy, directly impacting the power of the bishops and of the CECh. Second, the COP suggested that the CCPs were 'contaminated by a Marxist language', which, given the anti-Marxist rhetoric of the Pinochet regime, would have grave consequences for the Church as a whole. The COP likewise expressed worry that priests previously belonging to CpS were involved with the CCPs.[71] The COP of the Church rightfully identified overlap between former CpS participants and those in CCPs, but in exalting the role of the priests they overlooked the laity.

Starting in 1983, the year that anti-Pinochet protests began in full force, the Via Crucis faced various challenges, not just from left-wing party militants but also from conservative elements. For the Church the year 1983 was important, as Pope John Paul II replaced the progressive Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez with the conservative Cardinal Juan Francisco Fresno, who had publicly supported the junta.[72] Unlike Silva Henríquez, Fresno was a largely unknown entity to CCPs and individual members made their reservations clear in letters to *Policarpo*.[73] Fresno's ambiguities regarding the regime would have a chilling effect on popular Christian sectors.

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[68] 'Reunión de la Comisión Pastoral sobre las Comunidades Cristianas Populares', Anexo no. 2, Aug. 1982, CEDM, CCCP.

[69] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[72] Brian H. Smith, *The Church and Politics in Chile: Challenges to Modern Catholicism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 303.

[73] See 'La iglesia de Santiago y su Arzobispo', *Policarpo*, 3: 22 (1983), pp. 14–16; and 'Cambio de mando', *Policarpo*, 2: 20 (1983), pp. 7–8; 'Nombrado el nuevo Arzobispo de Santiago', *Policarpo*, 2: 19 (1983), pp. 3–5.

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The resurgence of attacks on liberation theology in Chile reflected a growing anti-liberationist trend within the Vatican. In Chile, the conservative newspaper *Ercilla* condemned liberation theology as a 'deformation of religious meaning and putting in the mouth of Christ the cry of revolution'.[74] References to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"' abounded and critique of liberation theology centred on its supposed uncritical adaptation of Marxism.[75] Such perceptions fell into a dogmatic interpretation of Marxism and reduced the nuanced and evolving liberation theologians' writings into rigid Marxist categories. Though liberation theologians adapted the social scientific method of analysing socio-political realities, their source of inspiration was scripture, and they did not renounce spirituality.[76] This conceptual tunnel vision regarding liberation theology further challenged the work of CCPs.

Tensions between the CCPs and the Church hierarchy worsened by 1986. The Archbishopric decreed the creation of the Departamento/Área de Comunidades Cristianas de Base (Department of Christian Base Communities) through which to organise and orient the base communities of the Archdioceses. The Coordinadora of the CCPs believed that the Department sought to supplant its functioning and fold the CCPs into the hierarchy's control.[77] Within the Coordinadora, divisive internal debates ensued. Not all members agreed on how to relate to this new Department, or on how to negotiate the continuation of activities such as the Via Crucis, which the Coordinadora had planned for years. Sergio Cárdenas recalled this time as one of internal tension:

> I worked in the eastern zone; I oversaw the Área de Comunidades of the eastern zone. I was paid. But also, I was in the Coordinadora, so I always had that tension. And they criticised me. It was not easy for me to live that situation, that internal situation. I went to the Departamento de Comunidades representing the eastern zone, but at the same time I was part of the Coordinadora, and the Coordinadora was not represented in the Department.[78]

[74] 'Actualidad: Teología de la Liberación', *Ercilla*, 9 Jan. 1985, p. 8.

[75] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"', Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 6 Aug. 1984, Vatican documents, available online at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html, last access 17 March 2024.

[76] Chilean Ronaldo Muñoz declared that one should not convert 'Marxism into a demonic ghost', in Ronaldo Muñoz interview, 'Dios se revela en los pobres', *Pastoral Popular*, 35: 4 (1984), p. 42. Gustavo Gutierrez argued that liberation theology, like all other theology, is also about God. See Gustavo Gutierrez, 'The Task and Content of Liberation Theology', in Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 19–38. The Chilean Segundo Galilea made spirituality a central focus of liberation. See Segundo Galilea, *The Way of Living Faith: A Spirituality of Liberation* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988). Attacks on liberation theology are also covered in Jennifer Scheper Hughes and Maria das Dores Campos Machado, 'Introduction: Spirits, Bodies, and Structures: Religion, Politics, and Social Inequality in Latin America', *Latin American Perspectives*, 43: 3 (2016), pp. 4–14.

[77] 'Conversación con Padre Felipe Barriga en torno a la relación de la Coordinadora con el Área de Comunidades Cristianas de Base', 18 Aug. 1986, CEDM, CCCP.

[78] Interview with Sergio Cárdenas, in charge of the *comunidades* of the southern zone, and director of the Archdioceses Department of Communities, Santiago, 6 July 2022.

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Cárdenas was not alone in feeling torn about his new position. Felipe Barriga, a former Sacred Heart Congregation priest and vicar of the southern zone, was appointed as the first director of the Department of Christian Base Communities. In this new role, Barriga thought of himself as a protective 'wall, a wall that was made of tin, of paper' between CCPs and the most conservative members of the hierarchy, who viewed the CCPs with suspicion.[79] He did, however, consider Fernando Castillo, the Coordinadora's advisor, as someone with intransigent positions, whose reading of scripture was highly sociological. Because the Pinochet regime consistently linked politics with subversion, the Church hierarchy, Barriga included, avoided the use of the term. For instance, Barriga did not consider demands to know the location of disappeared bodies as political, but simply as part of 'life'. His reading of these activities was influenced by his deep distrust of political parties and the use of politics to gain power.

Toward the late 1980s, the Coordinadora's relationship with the hierarchy increasingly soured. In its letter to Cardinal Fresno in September 1986, the Coordinadora did not hide its verbal attacks on the Pinochet regime or its expectations of Fresno. The letter lamented the expulsion from Chile of three foreign priests and demanded that Fresno refuse to celebrate the Te Deum in Pinochet's presence and not shake hands with a 'murderer that kills life'.[80] The letter asked Fresno to publicly 'denounce this dictatorship as amoral, illegitimate, and anti-Christian'.[81] Members of CCPs throughout Santiago also expressed disapproval of Cardinal Fresno's public stance toward the regime. In one such letter, Dolores Pérez and Luis Espinoza from the San Manuel de la Estrella Christian community in the Pudahuel municipality called on Fresno to reconsider the transfer of the parish priest from their *población*. They wrote, '[W]e also want to make it known to the Cardinal that the poor are not only being run over by a regime, but also by the ecclesial hierarchy, since it imposes unjust measures and does not listen to the people affected.'[82]

Throughout Santiago, participants in CCPs felt uneasy about the Cardinal's position as mediator between the Pinochet regime and the opposition. They likewise interpreted the Cardinal's public appearances alongside Pinochet or military members as a form of 'betrayal'.[83] The hierarchy of the Chilean Church had for several years called for reconciliation and unity, and on 25 August 1985, the Cardinal himself oversaw the signing of the 'National Accord for the Transition to Democracy' between moderate Chilean parties and supporters of the Pinochet regime.[84] The

[79]Interview with Felipe Barriga, who left the priesthood, former vicar of the southern zone, former director of the Department of Christian Base Communities, Santiago, 5 July 2019.

[80]Coordinadora de Comunidades Cristianas de Sectores Populares de Santiago, 'Carta al Señor Cardenal Don Juan Francisco Fresno Larraín', 15 Sept. 1986, CEDM, CCCP.

[81]*Ibid.*

[82]Luis Espinoza and Dolores Pérez, 'Carta al Encuentro de Comunidades Cristianas Populares', Oct. 1986, Parroquia San Luis Beltrán, Capilla San Manuel de la Estrella, CEDM, CCCP.

[83]Fernando Castillo L., 'IX Encuentro de Comunidades Cristianas de Sectores Populares: La unidad de nuestra iglesia', 25–26 Oct. 1986, CEDM.

[84]The Alianza Democrática (Democratic Alliance, AD) was composed of representatives from the following political parties: Partido Demócrata Cristiano, Partido Social Demócrata, Partido Radical, Unión Socialista Popular, Partido Socialista–Briones (PS–Núñez since 1986) and Partido Liberal. The Christian

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more diplomatic line of the Chilean Church hierarchy, according to theologian Fernando Castillo Lagarrigue, 'reflects a weakness in the option for the poor, and a weakness in the defence of human rights'.[85] For Castillo, at stake in the negotiations and in the Church's notion of reconciliation was the preferential option for the poor, which the CCPs had long fought for and which the CELAM conference announced at Puebla. For Christian communities, the hierarchy's position was ambiguous at best, given the constant military raids that *poblaciones* faced, the expulsion of priests, and the detentions and disappearances of Christian members.[86] However, they continued to make their opinions seen and heard through public rituals like the Via Crucis, albeit under a changed landscape.

The visit to Chile by Pope John Paul II from 1 to 6 April of 1987 was a politicised event that furthered tensions between the Left and the regime as well as within the Church. Pinochet sought to cloak his regime with pontifical legitimacy, as he staged the famous photograph of himself and the Pope on the balcony of La Moneda presidential palace. Most Chileans hoped that the maximum religious authority of the Christian world would cement their path to democracy. With the motto 'The Messenger of Life', Pope John Paul II traversed Chile from north to south, but his three-day stay in Santiago received the most attention.[87] In the capital, he held a closed-door meeting with Pinochet, met Chilean bishops and clergy, spoke to thousands of Chilean youths at the National Stadium, shared bread and tea with *pobladores* in Santiago's periphery, and urged reconciliation during a meeting with right- and left-wing Chilean political parties. No one was seemingly left untouched by the climate of hope and effervescence of that week in April.

Among the sites of the Pope's activities was the National Stadium, both a symbol of youth and of illegal detention, torture and death during the dictatorship. Though the Pope made no explicit references to the stadium's unholy uses right after the coup, he knelt to the ground to trace the shape of the cross, proclaiming, '[L]et us make the sign of the cross on this earth so that peace and reconciliation may spring from it.'[88] For teary-eyed youth whose chants of 'liberty' reverberated across the stadium, the act was one of catharsis. At the *población* La Bandera, a bastion of left-wing organising, the Pope was met with over 300,000 people. At all events, speeches had undergone revision by the Papal Commission, but once in front of the microphone several of the spokespeople chose to give their testimonies unencumbered. Such was the case of Luisa Riveros of *población* Violeta Parra and Mario Mejías of *población* Lo Hermida. 'We believe that you will have a message for the powerful to leave pride and selfishness and stop killing us in the

Democrats led the effort. See Eugenio Ortega Frei, *Historia de una alianza política: El Partido Socialista de Chile y el Partido Demócrata Cristiano, 1973–1988* (Santiago: CED–CESOC, 1992).

[85] Fernando Castillo, 'IX Encuentro de Comunidades Cristianas de Sectores Populares', p. 8.

[86] Coordinadora de Comunidades Cristianas Populares, 'IX Encuentro Anual de la Coordinadora de CCP: La unidad de nuestra Iglesia', Boletín Informativo 3, 25–26 Oct. 1986, CEDM.

[87] The left-leaning magazine *Análisis* dedicated an entire issue to the Pope's visit. See 'Visita del Papa, Chile: Entre Dios y la dictadura', *Análisis*, 10: 169 (1987). A portion of its next issue also covered the Pope's visit and its aftermath. See especially Fernando Paulsen S., 'La política después del parque', *Análisis*, 10: 170 (1987), pp. 4–6.

[88] See the documentary produced by the NGO Educación y Comunicaciones (ECO), 'La libertad remonta al estadio', 2 April 1987, available at https://youtu.be/fSPGwT5r7M4, last access 17 March 2024.

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poblaciones', asserted Mejías to the Pope and to the country watching on television or listening to the radio.[89] For this supposed transgression, Mejías' home was raided and he was illegally detained after the Pope's departure.[90] Riveros' testimony named all the ills she and women like her faced: unemployment, rising drug and alcohol addictions consuming their children, and poor-quality homes. As the 'Messenger of Life, we want to ask you, all of Chile, to say no to the death sentence', she urged the Pope.[91] By denouncing the dictatorial regime in front of national and international observers, and calling it by name, Riveros and Mejías had done the unthinkable. Even after the Pope left Chile, his words and presence continued to resonate, but the political landscape had now drastically shifted.

The Via Crucis of 1987: The Beginning of the End

The Via Crucis of 1987, in retracing Jesus' path to the cross, both suggested the eschatological nature of the Kingdom and reiterated the importance of a ritual that revealed present-day suffering. Such was also the notion of Father Jesús Herreros of *población* José María Caro, who called on the Via Crucis participants 'to be rebels like [Jesus] before the suffering of his brothers'.[92] That year's theme, 'The maker of life is still crucified today', responded directly to the military regime's heavy-handed repression and referenced the motto of the Pope's visit. The event also served as a reminder that human-rights violations should not be overlooked at the negotiation table.

The Via Crucis began at the Jesús Obrero parish, on the same block as the Hogar de Cristo (Home of Christ) charity, where participants denounced the economic misery that plagued Chile's popular sectors (see Figure 2). In his decades-long participation in the activities of his local parish, Alejandro Núñez of *población* La Legua Emergencia recalled being most stunned when processants took off items of their own clothing and donated them to Hogar de Cristo on the spot. 'It was impactful', Núñez stated in a breaking voice.[93] 'The poor cannot wait', proclaimed others in chorus as they also made references to *Laborem Exercens*, a 1981 encyclical by Pope John Paul II. From the parish, the procession proceeded to the location where two young people, Rodrigo Rojas and Carmen Gloria Quintana, were burned by police officers during a day of anti-regime protest in 1986. Rojas lost his life while Gloria Quintana sustained severe burns. The incident garnered international outcry and support. At this second station commemorating the victims of repression, Gloria Quintana's aunt, Ana Arancibia, proclaimed that in that very same spot, her niece had begun to 'defeat the culture of death to be transformed in a living symbol of justice'.[94]

[89]See his testimony reproduced in Aldunate *et al.*, *Crónicas de una iglesia liberadora*, p. 237.

[90]See Mejías' testimony of being kidnapped from his home: Mario Mejías, 'El poblador que le habló al Papa', in *ibid.*, pp. 115–17.

[91]See Luisa Riveros' testimony in *Análisis*, 10: 169 (1987), p. 14.

[92]'Jóvenes quemados, vertedero y profesores exonerados: Estaciones en Vía Crucis "popular"', *La Segunda*, 20 April 1987.

[93]Interview with Alejandro Núñez, lay Christian in the San Cayetano parish, Santiago, 20 June 2019.

[94]'Via Crucis popular: Al autor de la vida se le sigue crucificando', *Fortín Mapocho*, 18 April 1987. The Via Crucis stations were also covered in 'Jóvenes quemados, vertedero y profesores exonerados: Estaciones en Vía Crucis "popular"', *La Segunda*, 20 April 1987.

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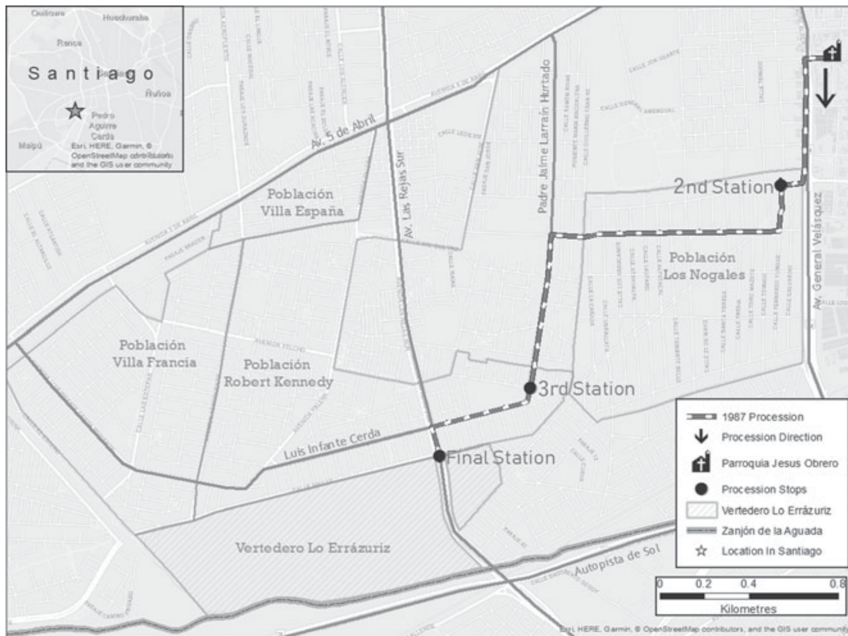

Figure 2. Route of the 1987 Via Crucis Procession through the Popular Sectors of Southwestern Santiago, Chile

Source: Map created by geographer Jordan Blekking, based on information provided by the author from the Coordinadora de Comunidades Populares archive.

The procession continued through *población* Los Nogales and south on Padre Jaime Larraín Hurtado Avenue until it reached the third station, the steps of the school 'D No. 277', then known by the name Escuela Japón (see Figure 2).[95] There, participants spoke out against the municipalisation of Chilean education and stood in support of recently laid-off teachers. By the time the procession reached its last station at the Lo Errázuriz landfill, around 5,000 people had congregated to condemn the 'the landfill of death'.[96] The Lo Errázuriz landfill contained garbage from 17 municipalities. Surrounded by *poblaciones*, the landfill impacted the lives and health of nearly 150,000 people. Residents were housed by literally tons of accumulated garbage, which produced toxic gases, attracted rats and insects, and contaminated the entire area (see Figure 2). The *pobladores* used all resources at their disposal to denounce the existence and illegality of the landfill, claiming discrimination based on poverty and the making of an environmental disaster. By culminating the procession at the garbage dump, the Via Crucis helped bring more attention to the plight of the *pobladores* condemned to abject conditions. If the landfill represented death, the presence of thousands signified life. The 1987 Via

[95]'Jóvenes quemados, vertedero y profesores exonerados: Estaciones en Via Crucis "popular"', *La Segunda*, 20 April 1987.

[96]*Ibid.*

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Crucis brought together intersecting themes and reiterated once again that the struggles of the popular sectors should be at the forefront of any national agenda.

The Via Crucis of 1990: Denouement

Lay Christians expressed their vision of national reconciliation to the Chilean bishops and demanded that it be taken seriously. The CCPs affirmed that the Christian popular sectors saw the Church's mission as having a prophetic voice, even if it implied persecution. They recognised that the word 'reconciliation' is fraught with ambiguity, but for them, no reconciliation could take place while a reigning political economy excluded the great poor majority of the country.[97] 'It is clear to us that there can be no reconciliation and peace between the executioner and the victim, between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the oppressed, as long as the executioner does not cease to torture, the rich do not cease to exploit, and the powerful do not cease to oppress.'[98] The signatories of the letter likewise saw the Church's role of mediator as problematic; a Church that opts for the poor cannot be a neutral referee. Ultimately, lay Christians worried that the Church's role of mediation would supplant the role of grassroots organisations in the re-democratisation process.

CCPs urged their members to vote against Pinochet in the plebiscite of 1988, but they reminded them that the election was a means to an end, not the end itself.[99] While they recognised that the plebiscite would not solve all the problems facing *pobladores*, they remained hopeful that it would open a path so that popular organisations, women, youth and *pobladores* could pose their demands more loudly than ever before.[100] However, participation in the 1989 gathering of the CCPs was at a record low.[101] The relations between the Coordinadora and the Church hierarchy were at a breaking point, as attacks on the Coordinadora mounted in order to diminish the strength of the CCPs. By the late 1980s, a more conservative trend within the Chilean Church had consolidated, in part because of the Vatican's attacks on liberation theology as a form of infiltration by the international communist community.[102]

The 1990 Via Crucis was particularly challenging for the CCPs. As Bravo held the letter personally addressed to her in 1991 by the archbishop of Santiago, Carlos Oviedo, she declared: 'I can't keep quiet, that is my big problem.'[103] The archbishop had scolded Bravo for organising the 1990 Via Crucis against the

[97]'Carta de tres miembros del Comité de Iniciativa de Laicos, tres miembros de la Coordinadora de las Comunidades Cristianas Populares, dos sacerdotes y una religiosa de sectores populares, a los Obispos de la Conferencia Episcopal de Chile', CEDM.

[98]*Ibid.*, p. 3.

[99]Coordinadora de Comunidades Cristianas de Sectores Populares, 'Carta a las comunidades cristianas de sectores populares', May 1988, CEDM.

[100]*Ibid.*, p. 3.

[101]'Evaluación Encuentro Anual de CCP', 7 Nov. 1988, CEDM, CCCP.

[102]Michael Löwy and Claudia Pompan, 'Marxism and Christianity in Latin America', *Latin American Perspectives*, 20: 4 (1993), pp. 28–42.

[103]Interview with Sonia Bravo Ortiz, former member of the Coordinadora of the CCPs, Santiago, 6 July 2019. Do not confuse Sonia Bravo Ortiz with the Sonia Bravo that served on the editorial board of the magazine *Pastoral Popular*. Both Sonia Bravos were connected to the CEDM.

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seeming wishes of then Cardinal Fresno. 'It is sad to disobey the Pastor', warned Oviedo.[104] Bravo was the executive director of the Coordinadora from 1988 to 1991, a role she cherished and for which, she felt, she had then earned the archbishop's ire. She responded to Cardinal Oviedo and wrote in her letter: 'I am a responsible adult and I try to be consistent with the faith to which I have been called based on what I have lived. It does not depend, therefore, on submissive and blind obedience.'[105] Indeed it did not. The Coordinadora organised the 1990 Via Crucis, like it had every year for a decade, with the theme 'Do not search among the dead for the one who is alive'. It would be its first during a democratic government, and its last.

The 1990 Via Crucis had a sombre tone, despite the lack of fear of police repression. Bishop Jorge Hourton was the only high ecclesiastical authority in attendance, and he noted that his presence was strictly personal, not representative of the Church institution.[106] None of the zonal vicars attended; it was an order from the archbishop. The procession began in the morning at the corner of Recoleta Avenue and Pedro Donoso under the northern zone's banner 'Cain, where is your brother?' (see Figure 3). They stopped in front of the house on Pedro Donoso where seven (of 12) FPMR militants were executed in 1987 by Pinochet's regime in what was called 'Operación Albania', which left-leaning militants redubbed the 'Corpus Christi massacre', because it occurred during that Catholic holiday.[107] By stopping at that site, processants sought to make clear that the new democratic government must confront the issue of human-rights violations, even in cases of left-wing violence. The second station, 'When the poor believe in the poor we can sing liberty', focused on the lack of economic mobility for the urban masses. They referenced 1979 Puebla documents about the preferential option for the poor. The third station connected Chile to Latin America under the banner 'Salvador, your veins are still open', referencing Eduardo Galeano's 1971 famous book, and participants prayed for the martyrs of all Latin American nations.[108] The last station, at the Nuestra Señora del Carmen parish, gave witness to the plight of Chilean youth. Bishop Hourton lamented the sense of helplessness among youth and considered it the 'worst blow to the dignity of men, because it is like cutting off all hope', and condemning them to 'death, a slow death, that of starvation, ignorance, and frustration'.[109] At the last station, too, the Coordinadora held a press conference detailing their decade-long trajectory and recognising the importance of the first Via Crucis post-dictatorship.

By April 1990, CCPs found themselves shrunken and increasingly isolated. The popular Via Crucis in Santiago's northern sector was just one such event. Inside the cathedral in the centre of Santiago, that same day, Archbishop Fresno held a similar

[104]Carlos Oviedo to Sonia Bravo Ortiz, 11 Jan. 1991, CEDM, CCCP.

[105]Sonia Bravo Ortiz to Carlos Oviedo, 25 Jan. 1991, CEDM, CCCP.

[106]'Via Crucis Popular: El rostro sufriente de Jesús en los crucificados de hoy', *Fortín Mapocho*, 14 April 1990.

[107]'Masiva participación popular en Via Crucis de la capital', *La Época*, 14 April 1990, p. 18. See Oscar Aguilera, *Operación Albania: Sangre de Corpus Christi* (Santiago: Fuerza Creativa, 1996).

[108]'Via Crucis Popular: El rostro sufriente de Jesús en los crucificados de hoy', *Fortín Mapocho*, 14 April 1990.

[109]Bishop Jorge Hourton, quoted in *ibid.*

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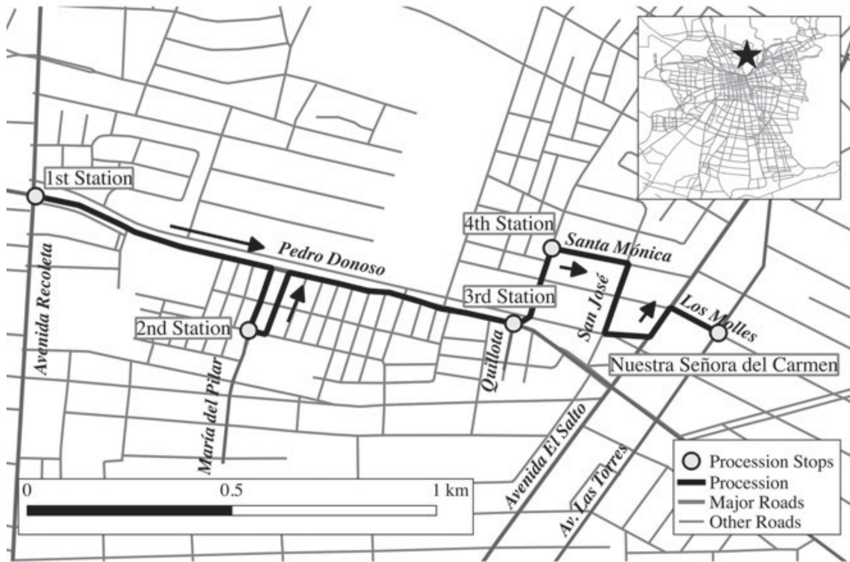

Figure 3. Route of the 1990 Via Crucis Procession through the Popular Sectors of Northern Santiago
Source: Map created by geographer Jordan Blekking, based on information provided by the author from the Coordinadora de Comunidades Populares archive.

ceremony to undermine the popular Via Crucis. The Coordinadora's Via Crucis was the largest manifestation where, according to press accounts, 4,000 participated. The lack of vicars and Church authority figures, however, undermined its religious value. Cardinal Oviedo labelled the Coordinadora an organisation 'parallel' to the Archbishopric's Department and asked it to dissolve. The Coordinadora did so on 7 March 1991. In its last letter to the CCPs, members of the Coordinadora affirmed their commitment to building a church of the poor where the laity would continue to exercise an important evangelising role.[110] 'The new socio-political context demands that our organisation readjust and redefine' itself, wrote the Coordinadora.[111] It ended over a decade of its existence as an organising body by deeply reflecting on the country's historical moment, an analytical exercise that had informed all of the activities of the CCPs. Indeed, the Chilean political landscape had experienced tectonic shifts over the 1980s, the period of most public denunciatory demonstrations by Christian communities.

Long-time participants in the grassroots church filtered their memories of the past through the painful experience of disintegration of the Coordinadora. When I interviewed them, they were still coming to terms with disillusionment and feelings of isolation of the post-transition period in Chile.[112] Internal disagreements

[110] Coordinadora de CCPs, 'Comunicado de la Coordinadora de Comunidades Cristianas de Sectores Populares', 7 March 1991, CEDM.

[111] *Ibid.*

[112] These feelings of disillusionment are not unique to Chile. See Irina Carlota Silber, *Everyday Revolutionaries: Gender, Violence, and Disillusionment in Postwar El Salvador* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

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regarding the relationship between the Coordinadora and the Department of Christian Base Communities, and members' individual life choices, led to mutual suspicion and distrust. Barriga had even abandoned the priesthood and more recently joined an ecumenical lay organisation. All lamented the loss of the collective and socially meaningful work through which they had sought to build a more just society. In this they were not alone. Centre-left governments in power in the 1990s furthered neoliberal restructuring, the consequences of which were not just economic, but social and political. Neoliberal democracy favoured intellectuals and technocratic experts as it ciphered leaders of social organisations into government positions, widening the gap between political elites and grassroots organisations.[113] As Jennifer Scheper Hughes and Maria das Dores Campos Machado argued for other cases in Latin America, '[T]he agency of spirits, both human and divine, is constrained (not liberated) by free market economies, precisely because they traffic in theologies of inequality and power.'[114]

Conclusion

Like social organisations and radical left militants that found their political activities paradoxically foreclosed by the return to democratic governance, CCPs too experienced retreat. Years of attack on liberation theology and the work of popular communities also took a toll. Christian communities witnessed the expulsion of foreign pastors, the replacement of liberationist religious figures and leaders with conservative ones, and illegal detentions, raids and even death of lay Christians, priests and community members. The tenuous balance between liberationist practices and traditional ecclesiastical paradigms tipped in favour of the latter. For the *pobladores* and religious personnel whose testimonies have peppered this article, participation in CCPs offered a shared space of reflection, dialogue and concrete actions through which to denounce regime excesses and build a more just and equitable future.

Via Crucis processions did not entirely cease in democratic Chile, but they no longer resembled the 1980s massive public demonstrations that took over the streets of Santiago's marginalised and working-class communities every April. Yearly, the processions had spatially moved to different neighbourhoods of Santiago's periphery as participants denounced economic misery and political repression and announced a path for liberation. By the 1990s, however, the Church's move toward an inward-looking spirituality implied a transformation of the Via Crucis. The Church hierarchy insisted that they take place in individual, local neighbourhoods, a concerted attack on the highly public and visible dimensions of the 1980s Via Crucis. In restricting the geographic space of this popular ritual for Santiago's *pobladores*, the Catholic Church simultaneously restricted the scope of its own engagement with the poor.

This article has shown that CCPs in Chilean shantytowns creatively used local places of human-rights violations to denounce regime repression and reclaim those very places as part of a longer history of working-class struggle. The public

[113]See Julia Paley, *Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-dictatorship Chile* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Clara Han, *Life in Debt: Times of Care and Violence in Neoliberal Chile* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*; Bastías Saavedra, *Sociedad civil en dictadura*.

[114]Scheper Hughes and Campos Machado, 'Introduction: Spirits, Bodies, and Structures', p. 13.

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events that the Coordinadora organised reveal overlapping tensions within diverse Church constituents, the state and political parties. Perhaps most importantly, centring the work of grassroots communities in marginalised neighbourhoods of Chile's capital reveals a historical moment with a far more capacious and radical conception of the political, one not reduced to political parties. The CCPs' fusion of religious and political activism helps explain why and how a significant grassroots sector lost clout in the transition to neoliberal democracy in the 1990s. This argument has implications for how we understand the social geography of grassroots communities at a moment of political transition in Latin America.

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Cargando la cruz: Comunidades Cristianas Populares y protesta religiosa durante la dictadura de Pinochet, 1973–90

Este artículo examina las actividades de las Comunidades Cristianas Populares (CCP) en barrios marginados de la capital de Chile, Santiago, durante la dictadura de Augusto Pinochet. Se rastrea cómo las CCP surgieron, prosperaron y luego se estancaron, para mostrar la incómoda coexistencia entre las prácticas de liberación propugnadas por los sectores populares y los paradigmas eclesiásticos tradicionales hasta su ruptura en 1990. Al hacerlo, sostengo que el ritual religioso es una importante forma de protesta social contra el autoritarismo. Las procesiones públicas expusieron tensiones entre la Iglesia y el Estado, dentro de los diversos miembros de la Iglesia, así como entre miembros de la comunidad cristiana y militantes de partidos de izquierda. A finales de la década de 1980, en la medida que la Iglesia se alejaba cada vez más de la teología de la liberación, la dictadura cooptó con éxito a las organizaciones sociales y volvió los rituales religiosos en gran medida ineficaces como forma de protesta social.

Palabras clave: Chile; comunidades cristianas; dictadura; organización de base; teología de la liberación; espacio urbano

Carregando a cruz: Comunidades Cristãs Populares e protesto religioso durante a ditadura de Pinochet, 1973–90

Este artigo examina as atividades das Comunidades Cristãs Populares (CCPs) em bairros marginalizados da capital do Chile, Santiago, durante a ditadura de Augusto Pinochet. Ele traça como os CCPs surgiram, prosperaram e depois pararam, para mostrar a difícil coexistência entre as práticas libertacionistas defendidas pelos setores populares e os

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paradigmas eclesiásticos tradicionais até ao seu ponto de ruptura em 1990. Ao fazê-lo, defendo que o ritual religioso é uma importante forma de protesto social contra o autoritarismo. As procissões públicas expuseram tensões entre a Igreja e o Estado, dentro dos diversos constituintes da Igreja, bem como entre membros da comunidade cristã e militantes de partidos de esquerda. No final da década de 1980, à medida que a Igreja se afastava cada vez mais da teologia da libertação, a ditadura cooptou com sucesso as organizações sociais e tornou os rituais religiosos largamente ineficazes como forma de protesto social.

Palavras-chave: Chile; comunidades cristãs; ditadura; organização de base; teologia da libertação; espaço urbano

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