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## THE NAZAS-AGUANAVAL GROUP: *Radical Priests, Catholic Networks, and Maoist Politics in Northern Mexico*

**ABSTRACT:** This article deals with the emergence of the Nazas-Aguanaval group of priests in the northern region of La Laguna, in northern Mexico, after the Second Vatican Council and the 1968 Medellín Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM). I argue that both the reformism of the Second Vatican Council and the push for a “preferential option for the poor” provided the space for an alliance between the progressive priests of the Nazas-Aguanaval group and the Maoist activists of *Política Popular* (People’s Politics, PP). In this context, it was the Nazas-Aguanaval priests who introduced *Política Popular*’s Maoism in La Laguna and Chiapas among peasants and students. At the same time, the radical tradition and economic conditions of La Laguna made it possible for local left-wing activists to connect with transnational currents such as the Movement of Priests for the Third World and Christians for Socialism. Based on a broad array of sources—including oral histories, Maoist pamphlets, local newspapers, Mexican security archives, and documentation from Mexican and Latin American priests’ organizations—this article brings together the regional history of protest in La Laguna, the historiography of the Global Sixties, and the history of the progressive factions of the Catholic Church in Latin America.

**KEYWORDS:** Catholic Church, Mexico, Maoism, Christians for Socialism, Liberation Theology

Lost among the chronicles of the emergence of a powerful movement of squatters in the northern Mexican region of La Laguna in the 1970s, we can find the story of a formidable alliance between students, priests, and squatters.<sup>1</sup> This coalition provided hundreds of impoverished rural immigrants with housing, services, and political power and created one of the most enduring experiments in collective farming in Mexico, the *Ejido*

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1. Throughout the text, I use “La Laguna” to designate the region that includes municipalities in Coahuila and Durango. The region is also crossed by the rivers Nazas and Aguanaval, which extend into the states of Durango and Zacatecas. The region has an urban component formed by the metropolitan area of Torreón, Gómez Palacio, and Lerdo. It also includes a rural hinterland of farms and smaller towns.

Colectivo Batopilas.<sup>2</sup> To explain the development of this coalition, previous studies on the squatters' movement in La Laguna have pointed to the survival of local traditions of rural working-class radicalism, including a rich but under-studied history of *lagunero* Maoist militancy.<sup>3</sup> The literature on Mexico's participation in the growing left-wing Catholic movements that emerged after the Second Vatican Council further recalls La Laguna as one of the few sites where direct involvement of local clergy resulted in popular mobilization.<sup>4</sup>

The case of the progressive priests of the Nazas-Aguanaval group in La Laguna stands out in a field dominated by the intellectual history of the reception of liberation theology in Mexico and the trajectory of left-wing bishops such as Samuel Ruiz in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, and Sergio Méndez Arceo in Cuernavaca, Morelos.<sup>5</sup> For instance, many historians have treated the diocese of Cuernavaca in the 1960s as the sole paradigm of progressive Catholicism in Mexico. Every Sunday during these years, the city of Cuernavaca witnessed the "Red Bishop" Méndez Arceo defend socialism, embrace liberation theology, and promote liturgical innovations such as folk *mariachi* music at mass.<sup>6</sup>

However, Méndez Arceo's tenure has been questioned by recent studies that have emphasized the problematic relationship between progressive Catholicism and the indigenous and traditional *mestizo* communities' religiosity. As Jennifer Scheper Hughes shows in her study of the Méndez Arceo campaign against images and popular devotions in Morelos, the liberatory project of progressive Catholics clashed with deeply ingrained religious traditions and local customs developed during colonial times. The idea of a human God involved in the

2. See Miguel Ángel Saucedo Lozoya, "Prácticas y representaciones sociales de colonos urbanos y trabajadores agrícolas. El caso de la región lagunera en los años '70" (PhD diss.: Sciences and Humanities for Interdisciplinary Development: Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila, 2016); and Juan Riera Fullana, *Ejido Colectivo Batopilas. Su historia* (Mexico City: Creática Editorial, 2016). The collective experience of Batopilas ended around 2020.

3. For a history of communist presence in La Laguna, see Barry Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 93–116.

4. See Edward Larry Mayer Delappe, "La política social de la Iglesia Católica en México a partir del Concilio Vaticano II: 1964–1974" (MA thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977), 272–273; Patricia Arias, Alfonso Castillo, and Cecilia López, *Radiografía de la Iglesia Católica en México, 1970–1978* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1981), 53–57; and Roberto J. Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia católica en México, 1929–1982* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica; El Colegio Mexiquense, 2012), 294–296.

5. For examples of the historiography of liberation theology in Mexico, see Luis G. del Valle, "Teología de la Liberación en México," in *El pensamiento social de los católicos mexicanos*, Roberto J. Blancarte, ed. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), 266–301; and Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez, "La teología de la liberación en México: recepción creativa del Concilio Vaticano II," *Theologica Xaveriana* 64:177 (2014): 157–179. On the controversies around Ivan Illich's anti-missionary project and the impact of his presence in Cuernavaca, see Chapters 2 and 5 in Todd Hartch, *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For the political biographies of Samuel Ruiz and Sergio Méndez Arceo, see Jean Meyer, *Samuel Ruiz en San Cristóbal* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 2000); and Raúl Macín, *Méndez Arceo, ¿político o cristiano? (Una revolución de la Iglesia)* (Mexico City: Editorial Posada, 1972).

6. Jesús García, "La Iglesia mexicana desde 1962," in *Historia general de la Iglesia en América Latina: México*, Alfonso Alcalá, ed. (Mexico City: Ediciones Paulinas, 1984), 408.

struggles of everyday people competed with a suffering Christ already appropriated by the exploited communities.<sup>7</sup> Only when both sides of the Catholic idea of Christ could be combined the liberatory project advanced.

As we have seen, several scholars have focused on regions of southern Mexico where the indigenous element is salient and the progressive Church developed an emphasis on defending the rights of the native population.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, they have overlooked the experiences of northern Mexico, where progressive Catholicism emerged in a totally different setting. As we will see when discussing the revolutionary tradition of the La Laguna, the Nazas-Aguanaval group worked in a region without indigenous communities, which was dominated by Torreón, a highly modern urban center, with a mestizo hinterland of recently created rural communities.<sup>9</sup>

The experience of the Nazas-Aguanaval group must be understood as part of a popular movement that involved the participation of individuals who identified as Catholics, rather than a Catholic movement per se. In the movements of peasants, students, and squatters of La Laguna, the religious component was never absent but it was not at the forefront of its organization. This article thus contributes to the literature on Catholic progressivism in Mexico during the 1970s with a case study of how Catholics were involved in leftist politics, the revolutionary ideas they held, and their attempt to live the preferential option for the poor.

The Nazas-Aguanaval priest group emerged in September 1970 out of the attempt by the diocese of Torreón to implement a *pastoral de conjunto* (joint pastoral plan) that would create six priest groups among the local clergy. The *pastoral de conjunto* involved a high level of collaboration and dialogue among all the ministers of the dioceses and lay people, through a plan established by the bishop. Diocesan priests Benigno Martínez, José Batarse, Armando Sánchez de la O., and Jesús and Tobías de la Torre formed one of those teams. In the mid 1970s, the group had 12 members, representing 17 percent of the

7. See Jennifer Scheper Hughes, "The Red Bishop, the Cristo, and the Aesthetics of Liberation," in *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

8. For a history of the Pacífico Sur bishops' group and their advocacy for indigenous peoples, see Kathleen M. McIntyre, "Liberation Theology, Indigenous Rights, and Nationalism," Chapter 5 in *Protestantism and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019), 131–158. For Bishop Samuel Ruiz's engagement with indigenous communities, see Jean Meyer, "La diócesis y el indio," in *Samuel Ruiz en San Cristóbal* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 2000), 115–154.

9. Tlaxcalans participated in the colonization of Coahuila, but they became integrated into the mestizo population of the province. The local indigenous population disappeared during the colonization process and the extermination campaigns that followed the US-Mexico War of 1847–48. See Martha Rodríguez, "El estado nacional," in *Coahuila. Historia breve* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016), 185–186.

diocesan clergy, and became an active minority within the diocese of Torreón, working in urban and rural parishes. Inspired by the ideas of the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), this group of priests tried to push the diocese in a more politically engaged direction.

The priests began working with a youth ministry and inside Catholic organizations such as the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano (Christian Families' Movement, MFC), mainly among the middle classes. The rise of a strong popular movement in the region between 1971 and 1977, reinforced by members of the Maoist organization *Política Popular* and local student activists, redirected the political commitment of Benigno Martínez, Armando Sánchez, and José Batarse.<sup>10</sup> These three participated in the activities of the Maoists, and faced jail and exile. Eventually, Batarse and Sánchez left the priesthood to join the *Política Popular* as full-time members. Conversely, Fr. Jesús de la Torre got involved in defending both the popular movement and his colleagues' commitment, appearing in the local press and on television. This combination of political involvement with the popular movement and public presence became one of the group's vehicles for engaging with the preferential option for the poor and facing the changes brought by the 1960s—scientific advances, the sexual revolution, issues of underdevelopment, the push for democracy. In the early 1980s, when the popular movement faded, the remnants of the Nazas-Aguanaval group promoted the creation of Christian Base Communities.<sup>11</sup> But it was too late, as the tide of progressive Catholicism had receded in La Laguna. The arrival of a new bishop and the beginning of neoliberal reforms in the countryside coincided with the end of the Nazas-Aguanaval group.

To reconstruct the history of the Nazas-Aguanaval group, I refer to the testimonies of two former members, Benigno Martínez and Armando Sánchez, and their political allies in the La Laguna people's movement of the 1970s. The weekly column of father Jesús de la Torre in the local newspaper *La Opinión* is

10. For a history of *Política Popular*, see Jorge Puma, "Small Groups Don't Win Revolutions: Armed Struggle in the Memory of Maoist Militants of *Política Popular*," *Latin American Perspectives* 44:6 (November 2017): 140–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X17699902>.

11. The Christian Base Communities had their origins in the pastoral practice of Brazilian Catholic reformers of the late 1950s who tried to revitalize religious practice among the laypeople of the poor rural and urban communities. After the Medellín conference of the CELAM the practice began to generalize among the progressive Catholics in Latin America. A non institutional and, at times informal organization that overlapped with parishes, the Christian Base Communities grouped Catholics practicing their faith (studying the gospel and rising consciousness) at the time they got involved in social and political affairs. For a study of Christian Base Communities in Mexico see Miguel Concha Malo et al., "Las comunidades eclesiales de base y el movimiento popular," in *La participación de los cristianos en el proceso popular de liberación en México*, Pablo González Casanova, ed., Biblioteca México: Actualidad y Perspectivas (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1986)

also essential to map the group's intellectual and political evolution. I examine these sources next to materials and files from the Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo archive, the municipal archive in Torreón, the First Latin American Conference of Christians for Socialism collection at Columbia University, and the José María "Pichi" Meisegeier collection at the Catholic University in Córdoba, Argentina. The result is a story that combines local and global elements of progressive Catholicism.

To grasp the significance of these Northern Mexican priests, it is necessary to reconsider the history of progressive movements among priests in Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century. Also, we need to center the pastoral and political work of hundreds of Latin American parish priests and religious men and women. Historians have already produced a substantial literature on the emergence of priests' groups inspired by the Second Vatican Council and the 1968 meeting of the CELAM in Medellín, Colombia.<sup>12</sup> The confluence of *Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo* (Priests for the Third World) with Peronism in Argentina, and the support of the Chilean *Cristianos por el Socialismo* in the Unidad Popular coalition have been thoroughly studied as cases of dialogue and cooperation between progressive Catholics and secular leftists.<sup>13</sup> The less studied case of the Golconda movement in Colombia provides an interesting example of the ample repertoire available to progressive Catholic priests in the 1970s, from armed struggle to social activism in the slums to journalism and theological reflection.<sup>14</sup> Finally, recent histories of the ONIS priest group in Perú show the interaction between foreign-born and local priests in the middle of a revolutionary process led by the armed forces.<sup>15</sup>

Parallel studies on Mexico are limited. These include the 1986 classic book edited by Miguel Concha on Christian participation in popular movements, Young-Hyun Jo's 2010 article about *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo* (Priests for the People), and most recently, Pilar Puertas's study on the Mexican chapter of

12. For an account of the impact the Second Vatican Council and the CELAM Conference on the emergence of a progressive tendency in the Latin American Church, see Pablo Richard, *Los cristianos y la Revolución*, M. Eliana Veas M., ed. (Santiago de Chile: Quimantú, 1973).

13. For the case of the Priests for the Third World, see José Pablo Martín, *El Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo: un debate argentino* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1992); and Marcelo Gabriel Magne, *Dios está con los pobres: el Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo, prédica revolucionaria y protagonismo social, 1967–1976* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2004). For a history of the Chilean Christians for Socialism, see Michael Ramminger, *Éramos iglesia . . . en medio del pueblo: el legado de los Cristianos por el Socialismo en Chile 1971–1973*, Julio Pinto Vallejos, ed. (Santiago de Chile: LOM, 2019).

14. See Javier Darío Restrepo, *La revolución de las sotanas: Golconda 25 años después* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1995).

15. See Juan Ramírez Aguilar, "Movimiento sacerdotal ONIS: la Iglesia en el Perú ante las demandas de justicia social (1968–1975)," *Phainomenon* 13 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.33539/phai.v13i1.333>; and Young-Hyun Jo, *Sacerdotes y transformación social en Perú (1968–1975)* (Mexico City: UNAM-CCyDEL, 2005).

Christians for Socialism.<sup>16</sup> Leaving aside Concha's seminal book, research on Mexican priests' movements focuses on the internal history of the Mexican Catholic Church, the overlap between theology and politics, and national organizations. Direct political commitment of diocesan priests in local struggles appears only in Concha's chapter on Christians and the popular movement. In fact, the progressive priests of La Laguna have been absent from the historiography of Latin-American progressive Catholicism. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining those priests' involvement with local struggles in light of the global changes brought by the Second Vatican Council.

I first situate the alliance between progressive priests and local movements in the history of the revolutionary tradition of La Laguna. Next, I examine the critical role that progressive priests had in facilitating the convergence of Maoist activists and *lagunero* students. Afterward, I explain how the convoluted history of the Mexican Church, together with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, provided the necessary context for the emergence of the Nazas-Aguanaval group. In the following section, I describe how the "preferential option for the poor" laid out at the 1968 CELAM conference led the Nazas-Aguanaval priests onto a path of more profound political commitment in favor of workers and peasants. Then, I provide a short overview of the participation of the Nazas-Aguanaval group in the Latin American networks of progressive priests that emerged in the early 1970s. Finally, the article concludes with an analysis of the last years of the Nazas-Aguanaval group, from their involvement in the agrarian conflict of the Batopilas vineyard to their final dismissal after the collapse of their leftist allies and the conservative backlash of Pope John Paul II.

## LA LAGUNA RADICAL TRADITION

Railroads, cotton, and water availability shaped life conditions in La Laguna. La Laguna was a sparse, uninhabited zone until the late nineteenth century when the construction of a rail line from Mexico City to the northern border with stops in La Laguna allowed the region to prosper. This was part of an effort by the central government to consolidate control over northern Mexico. The development of

16. See Young-Hyun Jo, "Movimiento 'Sacerdotes para el Pueblo' y la transformación socioeclesial en México," *Revista Iberoamericana* 21:1 (2010): 81–104; Miguel Concha Malo et al., *La participación de los cristianos en el proceso popular de liberación en México*, Pablo González Casanova, ed., Biblioteca México: Actualidad y Perspectivas (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1986); and Pilar Puertas, "Cristianos por el socialismo en México," in *Los proyectos católicos de nación en el México del siglo XX: actores, ideologías y prácticas*, María Gabriela Aguirre Cristiani and Nora Pérez Rayón y Elizundia, eds. (Mexico City: UAM-Xochimilco, 2020).

hydrological infrastructure around the Nazas and Aguanaval rivers, in addition to the presence of seasonal lakes, was crucial for transforming this empty semi-desert area into a prosperous community.

Even though the region of La Laguna comprises municipalities in two states, Coahuila (Torreón, Francisco I. Madero) and Durango (Gómez Palacio and Lerdo), Torreón became the political and economic center of the region. From its humble origins in the late nineteenth century and a population of 50,000 inhabitants in 1920, Torreón became a densely populated city in the 1970s, with a population that had grown fivefold over five decades, reaching 250,524 inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> The city played a crucial role in the Mexican historical imagination during the twentieth century. It was the site of two decisive battles during the Mexican Revolution, and, starting in 1936, La Laguna witnessed the most significant postrevolutionary agrarian reform projects, which lasted 57 years. Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas intervened and expropriated the land to distribute it to almost 32,000 sharecroppers and laborers.<sup>18</sup> One of the chief seats of Mexican Capitalism was transformed overnight into a gigantic experiment in collective farming and state intervention.

Throughout the twentieth century, Torreón, with its combination of industry, farming, and commerce, represented the contradictions between struggles for democracy, an active national state, and a capitalist development model. At the end of the 1960s, cotton production in La Laguna entered a crisis characterized by high unemployment. Factories and industries (soap, cattle food) that had been part of the original economic boom of the city faced foreclosure, and political unrest filled the ranks of Torreón's working class.<sup>19</sup> Previously, a wave of rural migration to urban areas had taken Torreón and Gómez Palacio to their peak urban density levels. In the early 1960s, they reached their highest levels of population growth. While the population density began to diminish after 1970, both cities experienced territorial expansion booms caused by the self-managed construction of houses by the urban poor.<sup>20</sup>

17. See *Localidades por Entidad Federativa y Municipio con algunas características de su población y vivienda: Aguascalientes a Guerrero, 1970*, Dirección General de Estadística, IX Censo General de Población, Mexico City, 1973.

18. The Cardenista project was not limited to land distribution. It also involved the building of irrigation infrastructure, including dams and channels, and the creation of financing and technical support institutions (a rural credit bank and a water authority). Cardenas's government and later administrations complemented these initiatives with a progressive educational project and left-leaning nationalist rhetoric. For an analysis of the Cardenista project and legacy, see *Lázaro Cárdenas: modelo y legado*, 3 vols., Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de las Revoluciones de México, Biblioteca INEHRM (Mexico City: INEHRM, 2009), vol. 3.

19. For an environmental history of the 1960s cotton crisis in La Laguna, see Chapter 3 of Mikael D. Wolfe, *Watering the Revolution: An Environmental and Technological History of Agrarian Reform in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

20. For a history of the "popular urbanization" process in Northern Mexico and how it happened at a time of slower population growth, see Luis Aboites Aguilar, *El norte mexicano sin algodones, 1970–2010: estancamiento, inconformidad y el violento adiós al optimismo* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2018), 149–166.



In the 1970s, a wave of protests and radicalism led by high school students struck La Laguna.<sup>21</sup> These protests began as purely local affairs, with strikes for better working conditions led by sanitation workers in Torreón and demands for better public services in Gómez Palacio. Still, the protests created a small group of militant cadres that included Catholics influenced by the pastoral work of the Nazas-Aguanaval group. They could have stayed an isolated student affair, but their contact with the Nazas-Aguanaval group changed that. It was actually the priests who brought the Maoists to La Laguna.

The *Política Popular* (PP) Maoists arrived at Torreón after a fortuitous encounter in 1971 between a *brigadista* (militant), Alberto Anaya, and Fr. José Batarse. Batarse gave a lecture at Juárez University (UJED) in Durango's capital titled "Analysis of Reality Based on God's Laws" and made a great impression on Anaya. Anaya, future leader of the Partido del Trabajo (Labor Party) in the 1990s, informed PP about the Nazas-Aguanaval activities. As a result, PP founder Adolfo Orive traveled multiple times in 1971 from Bahía de Banderas, in the western coastal state of Nayarit, to Torreón to convince José Batarse to allow the young activists of PP to join the priests in their social activism among the urban poor. The Nazas-Aguanaval group analyzed PP documents and compared them with Church positions on the social question developed after the Second Vatican Council and Medellín Conference. The Nazas-Aguanaval priests found them compatible and adopted PP's political analysis and some concepts regarding the role of "the people" as "the subject of its own history." They even asked the Maoist to develop a diagnostic of the social conditions of the region and then an action plan for them.<sup>22</sup> Later in the article, we will see how the priests applied their vision of the preferential option for the poor to the squatter movement of La Laguna and coincided with the Maoists in their support of workers and peasants.

PP began in Mexico City in the aftermath of the 1968 student movement, as a coalition of student activists that included Adolfo Orive, a former student of the French economist Charles Bettelheim, and a group of economics students from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (IPN). PP members had diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Some were middle-class students from the country's interior, while others, like Orive, were the children of former high-ranking officials in the federal government.<sup>23</sup> The coalition adopted a strategy of creating

21. See Salvador Hernández Vélez, *El movimiento urbano popular en La Laguna 1970–1980* (Torreón: Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila, 2014), 44–46.

22. Benigno Martínez, interview by Jorge Puma, November 22, 2020; Adolfo Orive, interview by Jorge Puma, October 18, 2012.

23. Hugo Andrés Araujo de la Torre, interview by Jorge Puma, July 30, 2014. For a recent history of the radicalization of middle-class students centered in Mexico City, see Louise E. Walker, "Rebel Generation: Being a

organizations fiercely independent of governmental control in the countryside and the new urban slums emerging in the peripheries of Mexican cities. Their political commitment combined a single-minded revolutionary élan with leftist sectarianism and a highly flexible sense of coalition politics. They stressed that a correct political line meant that they had to “live, work, and fight side by side with the masses. We have to know the needs and desires of the masses through their problems, traditions, and hopes.”<sup>24</sup> Following this premise, these former university students worked and lived with peasants and squatters, cultivating an image of self-sacrifice, altruism, and courage. At the same time, they led their organization’s day-to-day operations according to “the wishes of the people,” expressed in assemblies where all the inhabitants of their communities had a say. The tactic was as effective as it was radical. During the 1970s, these Maoist militants followed a simple credo of getting involved in daily life struggles for water, public services, and demands of union democracy and better salaries.

Javier Gil, one of the original PP militants who moved to Torreon in 1971, explained their arrival by underscoring the role of the Nazas-Aguanaval group: “We did not have a tactical nor strategical plan. No, we arrived to promote the mass movement using Batarse’s and other priests’ contacts and work as a foundation. We must recognize their good disposition to receive us, introduce us to people, and support us in everything. Our relationship with them created the possibility of reaching out to peasants.”<sup>25</sup> It took Javier Gil and Hugo Andres Araujo, the initial PP group, at least three years to consolidate an alliance with local activists, workers, and peasants. However, when the time came, they had strong roots in the new irregular settlements growing in the urban areas of La Laguna and a beachhead in the small sanitation workers union of Torreón.

## THE LOCAL APPROACH: THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IN LA LAGUNA, 1971-74

The explosion of militancy and popular activism during the 1970s in La Laguna upended the apparent calm reported by PP militants on their arrival in the area. Between 1971 and 1973, students at several local high schools and community colleges in Torreón fought to incorporate their schools into the University of Coahuila system. They also advocated for creating institutions of co-governance

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Middle-Class Radical, 1971–1976,” in *Waking from the Dream: Mexico’s Middle Classes after 1968* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

24. Línea Proletaria, *Por una línea de masas* (Mexico City: 1978), 10.

25. Riera Fullana, *Ejido Colectivo Batopilas. Su historia*, 172–173.

(*consejos paritarios*) between academics, students, and authorities. Besides marching in the streets, students closed their schools to protest reforms to curricula and evaluation methods at the Instituto Tecnológico Regional de La Laguna (ITRL). Finally, in 1972 the students went beyond local demands and engaged in acts of regional solidarity when they suspended classes in support of the protests organized by students at other *tecnológicos* in northern Mexico.<sup>26</sup>

PP militants became professors at the Coahuila University unit at Torreon. There they began to contact the already mobilized local students. Hugo Andrés Araujo, a former student of economics at UNAM and PP brigadista, called them *social-inquietos* (socially restless).<sup>27</sup> At that moment, dozens of students regarded PP as a vehicle to deepen their political commitment. Miguel Murillo, a medical student at that time, who had been working in La Laguna and had contacts with different groups in working-class neighborhoods and with peasant land petitioners, related the students' exposure to PP activism as follows:

[I]n Política Popular we started to structure a movement with a method. First, we started to change our attitude. We started listening to the people and taking into account their interests. We took a stance on a series of issues, and we had to be consistent with them. . . . We were embarking on a movement in the short, medium, and long term. We started making contacts; we started to form groups of land petitioners in some places like Corona, in San Miguel, to help them do the paperwork.<sup>28</sup>

Soon, student mobilization merged with popular demands articulated by peasants and squatters. Several of the most politicized student organizations moved away from traditional academic issues, leaving their classrooms to “integrate with the people” in the new working-class neighborhoods and the factories. Together, students and squatters occupied lands in Torreón, Francisco I. Madero, and Gómez Palacio, where they founded new “independent” communities with revolutionary names such as Tierra y Libertad (1973), Camilo Torres (1974), and Rubén Jaramillo (1975), among others.<sup>29</sup>

Discussing the beginning of the occupation movement, Father Jesús de la Torre, one of the members of the Nazas-Aguanaval group, wrote in April 1972: “At night we can see the fires from the tents. Some of the locals have even

26. Salvador Hernández Vélez, interview by Jorge Puma, August 12, 2013.

27. Hugo Andrés Araujo de la Torre, interview by Jorge Puma, July 30, 2014.

28. Riera Fullana, *Ejido Colectivo Batopilas*, 195–196.

29. For a short chronicle of each foundation, see Hernández Vélez, *El movimiento urbano popular en La Laguna*, 47–118.

commented that it looks beautiful, almost like an Exodus.”<sup>30</sup> Soon, students and priests followed them to a land burned by the sun, full of bugs, and punished by the elements. Two years later when an American researcher, Larry Meyer, asked them about the reasons for their political involvement in the urban movement, the priests argued they had an obligation to follow the poor into their embrace of political action: “When the wolf wants to destroy the sheep, there must be the shepherd to defend them or die with them.”<sup>31</sup> As we will see later in the article, their mutual commitment with the urban poor joined radicalized priests and radicalized students.

At the peak of the movement, young activists faced the repression of municipal authorities and police. The crackdown coincided with the growth of PP in the working-class neighborhoods of La Laguna and with the presidential election of 1976. The response of lagunero students to repression was different from that of their peers at the tecnológicos in Chihuahua, who joined the emerging guerrilla cells of the September 23rd Communist League.<sup>32</sup> As in many other parts of Mexico and contrary to the assumptions of left-wing militants, state repression and revolutionary ideals alone were not directly conducive to armed struggle.

The expansion and development of PP and the student movement in La Laguna held distinctive features. First, most brigadistas were teenagers or young adults from the local middle and high schools. Second, they had a militant mystique of self-sacrifice and ideological purity that strongly permeated all their attitudes and framed their actions with a dogmatism that quickly turned into sectarianism. They consistently declared that “the *partidos oficiales*” [the official parties, that is, the small “left-wing” parties recognized and supported by the Mexican government, such as the Partido Popular Socialista (People’s Socialist Party, or PPS)] fight for small gains, such as government posts obtained through elections. They end up using the people and betraying the cause of the proletarian revolution.”<sup>33</sup> Based on this view, PP militants thought of themselves as possessing the “only correct ideological line” toward revolution.

30. Jesús de la Torre, “Parece un éxodo,” in the column La Iglesia, promotora del hombre, *La Opinión* (Torreón, Coahuila), April 2, 1972.

31. Nazas-Aguanaval Group, “Se nos hace esta pregunta”; Mayer Delappe, “La política social de la Iglesia Católica en México,” appendix.

32. See Gerardo Necochea Gracia and Alicia de los Ríos Merino, “Violencia política y movilización popular: Chihuahua (México), 1972,” *Historia Caribe* 16:39 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.15648/hc.39.2021.2962>. For a discussion of armed struggle during the 1970s in Mexico, see Adela Cedillo and Ricardo Gamboa, “Interpretaciones sobre los espacios de participación política después del 10 de junio de 1971 en México,” in *Violencia y sociedad. Un hito en la historia de las izquierdas en América Latina*, Verónica Oikión Solano and Miguel Ángel Urrego Ardilla, eds. (Morelia: Colegio de Michoacán, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, 2010), 79–100.

33. Línea Proletaria, *Por una línea de masas*, 14.

Maoism was utterly hostile to Catholicism in China during the 1950s and the Jacobin tradition of the Mexican left was not precisely amicable to cooperation with the Church.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, former student activists from Torreón public schools, such as Héctor Ehrenzweig, recall their constant debates with conservative students from the Jesuit institution, Carlos Pereyra high school.<sup>35</sup> PP broke with this militant atheism and provided an ideological justification for cooperation. In a 1973 pamphlet that instructed its brigadistas on how to form a mass organization, PP advocated for strict respect of people's religious beliefs and identified "progressive priests" as friends of the people. The pamphlet declared: "Regarding the priests that help the people, we have to support them. . . . Many progressive priests have sincerely joined people's struggles because their spirits have been sensitive to the pain and despair of the masses. The revolutionaries are friends of these priests and extend their hands to them as comrades."<sup>36</sup>

PP militants were aware of the changes brought by the Second Vatican Council and understood the weight of Catholic tradition among Mexican population. They did not see any reason to handicap their movement by antagonizing a potential ally. In contrast to their intransigence in other matters, the positions of PP on religion and popular religiosity enabled the convergence of students, activists, and progressive Catholics. At the end, PP political heterodoxy and Nazas-Aguanaval group solidarity with the poor overrode the students' prejudices against Catholic involvement and Maoist atheism.

## THE MEXICAN CHURCH AND THE IMPACT OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

On October 16, 1976, Coahuila's state police detained Benigno Martínez, a Catholic priest, along with a group of PP activists, under bogus charges but with the clear intention of punishing their support of peasant and worker struggles in La Laguna. Fr. Benigno's trajectory exemplifies how the changes brought by the Second Vatican Council allowed the emergence of a progressive tendency in the Mexican clergy.

Born in León, Guanajuato, in a family of five brothers, Martínez enrolled in 1966 in the order of the Misioneros del Espíritu Santo (Holy Spirit Missionaries) and

34. For a history of the clash between Catholics and Maoists in China during the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), see Paul P. Mariani, *Church Militant: Bishop Kung and Catholic Resistance in Communist Shanghai* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

35. Hector Ehrenzweig, interview by Jorge Puma, July 7, 2021.

36. Anonymous, *Formemos una organización revolucionaria con profundas raíces en el pueblo* (Mexico City: n.p., 1973), 53-55.

studied in Mexico City's Altillo seminary. There, he was influenced by the ideas of the Second Vatican Council and collaborated with the Secretariado Social Mexicano (Mexican Social Secretariat, SSM) under Pedro Velázquez. Martínez spent a few months working in the slum of Cerro del Judío in Mexico City and later worked as an advisor to the Juventud Obrera Católica (Young Catholic Workers, JOC). That experience changed him. After requesting permission to abandon his order, he moved to Torreón in August of 1969, looking for a place where he could work as a priest committed to the idea of social change. At his arrival in La Laguna, Benigno worked in the town of San Pedro de las Colonias, promoting the liturgy and enrolling peasants in the Catholic organizations of the diocese. Despite his being one year short in his theology studies, the bishop of Torreón, Fernando Romo, ordained him as a priest on February 2, 1970. Bishop Romo then appointed Benigno head of the youth ministry, and soon he got involved in promoting the ideas of the Second Vatican Council and the 1968 CELAM conference.

Later, as a rural parish priest, Father Benigno Martínez was fundamental in connecting PP activists with a group of discontented farmhands from the Batopilas vineyard, then a privately owned farm dedicated to producing grapes for making brandy.<sup>37</sup> When the farmhands stopped receiving their salaries in 1972, they organized a strike with the support of the Nazas-Aguanaval priests. The state government expropriated the farm and in 1974 Batopilas became an experiment in communal farming and self-management when the former farmworkers became *ejidatarios* and took over the farm. The detention of Fr. Martínez and PP militants happened in the context of the transformation of Batopilas into an *ejido* (communal farm).<sup>38</sup> The police accused them of engaging in acts of vandalism, although the actual perpetrators belonged to the Partido Popular Socialista.<sup>39</sup> The conflict between PP, which supported the squatter and peasant movement in La Laguna, and the government of Coahuila escalated during the second week of October of 1976. Benigno Martínez was one of a group of progressive priests who had supported the movement since 1971, and who were targeted and harassed by the state police, together with PP activists. One of these priests, Fr. José Batarse Charur, hid in the parish house of the town of Francisco I. Madero under the protection of his parishioners, while the police waited outside to take him to prison.<sup>40</sup>

37. Benigno Martínez, interview by Jorge Puma, November 22, 2020; De la Torre, "Parece un éxodo."

38. On the participation of Benigno Martínez and other priests in the early stages of Batopilas's transformation into a self-managed collective farm, see Riera Fullana, *Ejido Colectivo Batopilas*, 168–185.

39. Juan de Ayala, "600 campesinos del PPS bloquean carreteras en San Pedro, Coahuila," *Excelsior*, October 12, 1976.

40. "Serie de arrestos en Francisco I. Madero," *La Opinión*, October 16, 1976.

Most accounts about Fr. Benigno Martínez's detention and the persecution of José Batarse emphasize the reaction against Coahuila's state government and the broad coalition that came to Batarse's defense. Middle-class Catholics, Méndez Arceo, squatters, and even the national leader of the PAN raised their voices in support of Batarse. All of the accounts mention the protection that the bishop of Torreón, Fernando Romo, provided to Batarse and his courageous stand in support of "people's causes."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Bishop Romo intervened on behalf of Torreón's sanitation workers during their strike in 1973.<sup>42</sup> In his Palm Sunday homily of April 15, 1973 Romo spoke of the unsolved problem of land distribution and the suffering of the squatters and encouraged his parishioners to understand and support the struggle of workers demanding better working conditions. At the end of the homily, published in *El Siglo de Torreón*, Romo declared: "We have to understand that, in case of doubt, Christians should always act on behalf of those in need because that was the position of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>43</sup> Romo acted on several occasions to protect his priests, but he resented it when their political commitment got in the way of respecting Church discipline.<sup>44</sup>

In a press release published by *El Siglo de Torreón* on October 24, 1976, Bishop Romo complained about the protesters and the squatter organizations' demand to keep Batarse in Torreón after Romo ordered his transfer to Chiapas. He accused PP of coercing Batarse to stay and disobey him. With this statement, Romo sought to reinforce the image he had built as a bishop committed to the welfare of his people: "My concern, affection, and love for the poor and dispossessed, hurt too much and for so long, [have] always kept me looking for the best ways to serve them. That is why I chose priests that could serve them best."<sup>45</sup> However, Romo also expressed his weariness with the "methods" that led the common people to assume a disgruntled attitude instead of an accepting one. Like other Mexican bishops and the Mexican Episcopal Conference, Romo had trouble dealing with the challenges posed by left-wing priests involved in social activism with workers, peasants, and squatters. Bishops oscillated between dialoguing with the radical priests, transferring

41. "Sacerdotes comprometidos . . . y desterrados," *Proceso*, November 6, 1976; Concha Malo et al., *Cristianos*, 153–157.

42. For a chronicle of the sanitation workers' strike, see Hernández Vélez, *El movimiento urbano popular en La Laguna*, 73–97.

43. Fernando Romo Gutiérrez [bishop of Torreón], "Palabras del Obispo," *El Siglo de Torreón*, April 16, 1973.

44. As I will show, in 1976 Bishop Romo negotiated with the state government through Father Rodríguez, a conservative priest of his entourage, the release of Father Benigno Martínez in exchange for Fr. Batarse's removal to the diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas. Sergio Méndez Arceo, "Plática sostenida con Don Samuel Ruiz," October 20, 1976, Centro Académico de la Memoria de Nuestra América, Mexico City [hereafter CAMeNA], Sergio Méndez Arceo Archive, Personal Collection, box 72, folder 1.

45. Fernando Romo Gutiérrez, "Mensaje del obispo," *El Siglo de Torreón*, October 24, 1976.

them, issuing calls to obedience, and denouncing their attempts to use the cause of the “oppressed people” as part of an “international plot.”<sup>46</sup>

Romo and other bishops put institutional obedience over these radical priests’ prerogatives, but he always protected his priests from governmental repression. When the state police kidnapped Fr. Jesús de la Torre in 1978, Romo published an open letter to President José López Portillo asking for De la Torre’s release.<sup>47</sup> However, Romo never abandoned his role as an institutional leader defending the unity of the Church. In 1976, he declared: “There are not two Churches, the bishop’s and the people’s; the Church is one, and the Lord put Peter and the apostles, among them the Pope and the bishops, in charge.”<sup>48</sup>

The priests of the Nazas-Aguanaval group had a different interpretation of Romo’s reaction. On November 20, 1976, Benigno Martínez sent a letter to the bishop analyzing the conflict around the detention of PP militants related to the Batopilas farm and its resolution, from the progressive priests’ point of view. In the letter, Martínez criticized Romo for forcing Batarse into the crucible of supporting the popular movement or being obedient to the bishop. He used a Maoist trope, “a lack of integration with the people,” to explain Bishop Romo’s shortcomings.<sup>49</sup> The clash between the Nazas-Aguanaval group and Bishop Romo was harsh but never reached a breaking point.

The latter episode is illustrative of the profound transformations that affected the Church during this period and of the set of conflicts that put into question deep-seated notions of what it meant to be a Catholic in the political realm. These transformations should be understood against the backdrop of the changes set in motion by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In less than a decade, the climate created by the council’s reforms enabled a small but highly active section of the Mexican clergy to move from sponsoring anticommunist demonstrations to allying with left-wing activists.<sup>50</sup>

46. See Arias, Castillo, and López, *Radiografía de la Iglesia*, 57–60. For an example of rejection of the possibility of an alliance between Catholics and Socialists, see Cardinal José Salazar’s speech in Arias, Castillo, and López, *Radiografía de la Iglesia*, 110–114.

47. See Fernando Romo Gutiérrez, “A la opinión pública,” *El Siglo de Torreón*, April 29, 1978. The *opinión* was a paid insertion consisting of a letter to the Mexican president and government authorities.

48. Romo Gutiérrez, “Mensaje del obispo.”

49. Sergio Méndez Arceo, 24. Carta a obispo Fernando Romo (Benigno Martínez), November 20, 1976, CAMeNA, Sergio Méndez Arceo Archive, Personal Collection, box 72, folder 1.

50. On clerical anticommunism during the Cold War, see María Pacheco, “Cristianismo sí, comunismo no! Anticomunismo eclesialístico en México,” *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México* 24:24 (2002). For a history of left-wing Catholicism in Latin America during the 1960s and beyond, see Jean Meyer, “El radicalismo rojo (1960),” in *Historia de los cristianos en América Latina. Siglos XIX y XX* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1999).



The Second Vatican Council promoted a more decentralized and less hierarchical Church, emphasizing individual conscience and openness toward other religious and philosophical traditions.<sup>51</sup> Conservative sectors of the Mexican Church, particularly bishops like Antonio López Aviña of Durango, and others who identified with traditionalist and integralist perspectives, faced the changes imposed by the Second Vatican Council with a sense of uneasiness and resistance.<sup>52</sup> Their weariness was probably informed by the Church's previous encounters with progressive ideologies. Indeed, the constant clashes with radical Liberalism in the nineteenth century, and later with the postrevolutionary governments of the 1920s, set a precedent that was hard to overcome.

Considering the religious persecution experienced by the Church during the prior decades, it is difficult to imagine an attitude for the Mexican bishops other than active opposition to Liberalism and socialism—on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, conservative positions among the Mexican bishops were hegemonic. Historically, this conservatism did not approve of the existence of independent Catholic lay movements. As a result, the bishops' relationship with political movements with ample Catholic participation but outside of the hierarchy's control, such as *sinarquismo* or the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, or PAN), was always ambivalent.<sup>53</sup> These attitudes partly explain why the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, with a new role for laypeople, never got traction among the Mexican hierarchy who remained attached to the older model of Catholic Action.

Nonetheless, the Mexican Church stumbled upon the task of modernizing its structures and doctrine. The bishops gave a new impetus to the reading of Scripture. They made timid moves towards collegiality by creating informal groups to exchange opinions and experiences.<sup>54</sup> Robert Mackin argues that two main factors prevented the emergence of a solid progressive faction in Mexico's Church: the subordinate position of the Church to the state; and its failure to advocate for a set of social policies that could compete with the

51. Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2007), 93.

52. Archbishop López Aviña participated in the Second Vatican Council. In his memoirs, he repeatedly defends his loyalty to the council's teachings while rejecting the idea of a "new Church." Despite recognizing the revolutionary nature of the event, he provides a very traditionalist reading of the council's mission, summarized in the sentence: "Christ is the same as yesterday, today, and always." See Antonio López Aviña, "Asistencia al Concilio Euménico Vaticano II," in *Remembranzas de un obispo* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 2001). For a short overview of the reaction of Mexican traditionalists to the Second Vatican Council, see Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia católica en México*, 280–287.

53. Sinarquismo arose as a vehicle for the continuous mobilization of Catholic laypeople after the religious conflict. Between 1937 and 1944, sinarquistas became a transnational movement with a large peasant following in the Bajío region and the American Southwest, bound together by the idea of a Catholic nation and a counterrevolutionary discourse. See Jean Meyer, *Historia de los cristianos en América Latina*, 307–310.

54. For the position of the Second Vatican Council on the development of formal and informal structures of cooperation among bishops, especially the analysis of article 37 of the *Christus Dominus* decree, see Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), 329–334.

national-revolutionary welfare state.<sup>55</sup> In Brazil and Chile, bishops, priests, and theologians were experimenting with new pastoral practices and organizational innovations like the *comunidades eclesiales de base* (Christian Base Communities, or CEBs). In contrast, in Mexico, the bishops were trying to reinforce the model of 1930s Catholic Action to get closer to their flock.<sup>56</sup> Despite this general pattern, a few Mexican bishops and priests tried to emulate their South American peers. They soon gained notoriety for their actions and ideas.

At the end of the Second Vatican Council, a group of eight bishops led by Alfonso Sánchez Tinoco from Papantla formed the Unión de Mutua Ayuda Episcopal (Episcopal Mutual Aid Union or UMAE) and attempted a renewal of the pastoral work in their dioceses by promoting cooperation between bishops interested in incorporating the council's innovations. Members of the UMAE invited the French priest and scholar Fernand Boulard to research their communities' social conditions and help them develop a plan to attend to the faithfuls' needs, based on the spirit of Vatican II. The result of that collaboration was a report published in 1966, exploring the demography and economy of nine dioceses.<sup>57</sup> Also, starting in 1965, the UMAE partnered with the Instituto de Pastoral Latinoamericana (Latin American Pastoral Institute) to impart courses introducing hundreds of priests and nuns to the ideas and practices of a *pastoral de conjunto*.<sup>58</sup> In 1966, the UMAE formed a committee to promote the *pastoral de conjunto* and advocated for the formation of diocesan commissions centered on pastoral ministry, with uneven results.

In this context, under the guidance of Bishop Fernando Romo and following the pattern of the *pastoral de conjunto*, a group of progressive priests developed pastoral and social work among the farmers and land laborers of La Laguna's countryside. They had begun to move from working with middle-class Catholic organizations such as the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano to engaging directly with the mass of impoverished urban dwellers and young peasants looking for land.<sup>59</sup> The bishop tolerated them because of the conditions of his

55. See Robert Sean Mackin, *The Movement that Fell from the Sky? Secularization and the Structuring of Progressive Catholicism in Latin America, 1920s–1970s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005).

56. See Mayer Delappe, "La política social de la Iglesia," 61–195. We do not have precise statistics on the size of the progressive faction in Mexico. However, Baltazar López, a longtime supporter of Bishop Méndez Arceo, estimated that only 15 percent of the Mexican clergy supported the application of Second Vatican Council methodologies. See Roderic Ai Camp, *Crossing Swords: Politics and Religion in Mexico* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 1997), 86.

57. See Unión de Mutua Ayuda Episcopal, *Investigación regional para la planeación pastoral*, Mexico City, 1966.

58. The courses included subjects such as the theology of evangelization, history of the evangelization process in Mexico, and social and religious obstacles (*condicionamientos*) to evangelization. Jesús Torres Jara, Unión de Mutua Ayuda Episcopal, in Correspondencia de Sergio Méndez Arceo, 1967–1968, CAMEANA, Mexico City, Sergio Méndez Arceo Archive, Diocesis of Cuernavaca Collection, box 15, folder 16-3.

59. See Jesús de la Torre, "XXVIII Asamblea Nacional de Trabajadores Guadalupeños," in the column La Iglesia, promotora del hombre, *La Opinión*, September 12, 1971; and Jesús de la Torre, "¡Alto ahí!" in the column La Iglesia, promotora del hombre, *La Opinión*, October 10, 1971.

see, which was in dire need of priests. According to a study at the University of Trent, in 1967 there were only 14 parishes served by 52 priests in the diocese of Torreón.<sup>60</sup> As each priest had to minister to almost 7000 parishioners, Bishop Romo needed to preserve his forces and was open to recruiting any priest he could get. Romo's policy opened the opportunity for priests expelled from more conservative dioceses to seek refuge in Torreón.

However, in a diocese that had only 12 years of existence, the resistance to the innovations of the Second Vatican Council and the political commitment of these priests came from sectors of the clergy and the middle classes who supported a more traditional view of Catholicism. These traditionalists complained about the abandonment of the fiercely anticommunist outlook of the previous period and expressed a longing for a Church "purely" committed to the spiritual and sacramental.<sup>61</sup> Between 1970 and 1974, a conservative columnist identified as E. Villarreal carried that critique in the editorial pages of the local newspaper *La Opinión*, constantly debating Fr. Jesús de la Torre's articles on Catholic progressivism: "They [the Nazas-Aguanaval group] don't believe in God but in the historical process. The 'Theology of God's death' turned them into worshipers of Marx. They don't believe in anything, and that is why they preach nihilism."<sup>62</sup> These strong words haunted the practitioners of the preferential option of the poor at Torreón and the rest of Latin America. The Conservative critique denied the religious element of the progressives' practices and ideas. The critique certainly responds to the emphasis the progressives gave to the matters of the world, but it obscures the whole range of progressive responses to the spiritual and religious practice.

As noted above, Bishop Romo maintained an ambiguous stance toward the popular movements and the active participation of some of his priests in them. In 1973, Romo defended the strike by Torreón's sanitation workers, but one year later, he explained his declaration of support as an attempt to raise awareness of the needs of the poor, rather than an endorsement of the strikers.<sup>63</sup> Still, Romo's position seems far more progressive than the one taken by Durango's archbishop, Antonio López Aviña, who did not allow the introduction of any progressive practices in his diocese.<sup>64</sup>

60. Università degli studi di Trento, Centro interuniversitario per la ricerca matematica, *El Catolicismo en cifras América y México, Comisión de Estadística*, 2nd ed. (Trent: Publicaciones de la CIRM, 1967), 24.

61. For a more in-depth treatment of the traditionalist tendency in Mexican Catholicism, see Luis Herrán's text in this issue.

62. E. Villarreal, "Demagogia clerical," editorial opinion, *La Opinión*, October 20, 1971.

63. For the ambiguous position of Romo regarding his support of the janitors' strike, see his letter to Mayer Delappe in the appendix of Mayer Delappe, "La política social de la Iglesia."

64. Not long before his death in 2007, Romo bragged that despite the challenges he faced, he had lost only five priests while the heavy-handed approach of López Aviña had lost him dozens. Javier Garza Ramos, "La memoria del

## THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR: THE PEOPLE'S PRIESTS OF LA LAGUNA

In 1968, the Second CELAM Conference in Medellín inspired priests to further discuss the transformations promoted by the Second Vatican Council and their application to the Latin American context. In the conclusions of the conference, the progressive wing of the Latin American Church found its rallying cry: the preferential option for the poor. For these progressives, it was time to shift away from the Church's traditional siding with the powerful and wealthy and, instead, move "closer to the poor in sincerity and brotherhood."<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, in the aftermath of Medellín, internal conflict was rife within the Mexican Catholic Church. A small group of newly ordained priests pushed for the implementation of measures according to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. From the seminaries of Mexico City to the urban parishes of Guadalajara, Monterrey, and León, voices of change confronted the ecclesiastical establishment. They sought to give new life to the exhausted structures of the Mexican Catholic Action.<sup>66</sup>

At some dioceses, compromises between bishops and local oligarchies hindered the push for change. For instance, under the pressure of local business organizations, the bishop of León forced the priests Armando García, Natividad Fuentes, and Carlos Zarazúa—who were working with the JOC—to leave the city. These priests moved to Torreón, where they found refuge and a space to work following the principles of progressive Catholicism developed after the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín Conference. There, they met with Fr. Benigno Martínez and became the core of the Nazas-Aguanaval group. Martínez had traveled from Mexico City to Torreón, leaving behind an elite-oriented Catholicism and instead adopting a vision centered on the preferential option for the poor, thanks to his contact with the progressives

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obispo," interview, *El Siglo de Torreón*, December 16, 2007, <https://www.diocesisdetorreon.org/honraran-memoria-del-primer-obispo-de-torreon>, accessed January 10, 2022. For López Aviña's position regarding Christian Base Communities, see José Miguel Romero de Solís, *El aguijón del espíritu: historia contemporánea de la Iglesia en México, 1892–1992* (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán AC, 2006), 502.

65. General Secretariat of CELAM, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council: Conclusions*, Louis Michael Colonnese, ed. Latin American Bureau, Division for Latin America, Department of International Affairs, United States Catholic Conference and the General Secretariat of CELAM (1970), 216.

66. Mayer Delappe, "La política social de la Iglesia," 247–266. Mexican Catholic Action was an organization that concentrated the laity to "re-Christianize" society. It was founded in Mexico in 1930 with four branches. For men, there was the Unión de Católicos Mexicanos; for women, there was the Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana. For younger men, there was the Asociación Católica de la Juventud Mexicana, and for younger women, the Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana. For a history of Mexican Catholic Action, see Bernardo Barranco V, "Posiciones políticas en la historia de la Acción Católica Mexicana," in *El pensamiento social de los católicos mexicanos*, Roberto J. Blancarte, ed. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), 39–70.

from the JOC, and the SSM, and with those supporting the work of SSM director Pedro Velázquez.<sup>67</sup>

In 1983, after 13 years of pastoral work, the Nazas-Aguanaval group had a presence in the parishes of Matamoros, Cristo Redentor del Hombre (Torreón), La Unión, Francisco I. Madero, and Concordia. They tried to push the diocese in a more politically engaged direction, following the ideas of the Second Vatican Council, Medellín, and the mutualism of UMAE.<sup>68</sup> Most of them had humble origins and were in their early thirties in 1968. Some came from the Catholic traditionalist hotbed of Guanajuato, but others were part of La Laguna's middle class.

As we saw earlier, the figure that brought together PP and the Nazas-Aguanaval group was the priest José "Pepe" Batarse Charur. After finishing his chemical engineering degree at the tecnológico in La Laguna, Batarse entered the seminary and was ordained a priest in Monterrey. He studied in Spain and Rome before returning to La Laguna to minister.<sup>69</sup> His name appeared regularly in the announcements of weddings, baptisms, and Catholic charity events in the Society section of *El Siglo de Torreón*. Conversely, Father Jesús de la Torre's column in *La Opinión* portrays Batarse as a cleric highly involved in the inner life of the dioceses. Indeed, Batarse led the efforts to renew Catholic Action in Torreón and supervised the local JOC. Fellow priest Benigno Martínez even saw in Batarse the potential to become bishop, given his prominent leadership in the diocese.<sup>70</sup>

Another sign of these priests' promotion of progressive Catholicism was the announcement of a series of talks sponsored by a Catholic Action organization, the Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (Union of Mexican Catholic Women, UFCM) in the cathedral of Torreón. Buried in the social section of newspapers along seemingly unimportant stories, the announcements gave news of talks by Fr. Benigno Martínez about the Second Vatican Council and its reforms, to be

67. Benigno Martínez, interview by Jorge Puma, November 22, 2020. Rev. Pedro Velázquez (1913-68) was the director of the Mexican Social Secretariat (SSM) for 20 years. He gradually led the SSM to become independent from the hierarchy and tried to engage with Marxism, offering Catholic Social Teaching as a solution for social injustice (poverty, exploitation, workers' rights). For the role of Pedro Velázquez in the emergence of a more progressive Catholicism in Mexico, see Mayer Delappe, "La política social de la Iglesia," 274-279.

68. Benigno Martínez, interview by Jorge Puma, November 22, 2020; Comisión de Prensa, "Comunidades Eclesiales de Base. XI Encuentro Nacional, Concordia, Coah." October 1983, CAMENA, Sergio Méndez Arceo Archive, box 114, folder 29-2, page 9. For statistics on the Mexican dioceses see "Apéndice estadístico," in Mayer Delappe, "La política social de la Iglesia," 3.

69. Agustín Acosta Zavala, *Así lo recuerdo* (Mexico City: Senado de la República, 2015), 160; Miguel Ángel Ruelas, "Sacerdote mexicano que laboró en Radio Vaticano," *El Siglo de Torreón*, July 23, 1972.

70. Benigno Martínez, "Conferencia testimonial en memoria de José Batarse Charur: participación de la Iglesia progresista en los movimientos de masas de La Laguna," 50 años de línea de masas en México, INEHRM, [https://inehrm.gob.mx/es/inehrm/A\\_50\\_anos\\_linea\\_de\\_masas](https://inehrm.gob.mx/es/inehrm/A_50_anos_linea_de_masas), accessed January 20, 2022.

held each Friday afternoon during Pascua (Lent) of 1972.<sup>71</sup> Later, on August 26, the Nazas-Aguanaval group published a manifesto in *El Siglo de Torreón*, denouncing the detention of peasants from the La Victoria and La Fe ranches. In the manifesto, the priests condemned governmental repression and declared themselves in favor of the struggles of “workers, peasants, railroad workers, electricians, students, and squatters.” Moreover, they asked Catholics belonging to the rich and influential sectors of society to “review before God their Christian commitment to their fellow brothers who suffer oppression.”<sup>72</sup> The group’s process of radicalization would deepen in the following five years.

From 1971 onward, the Nazas-Aguanaval group became involved in organizing peasants and squatters in La Laguna. They limited their ministerial activities to weekends and at other times served as advisers to their parishioners in their demands for land and services. Through their contact with the PP, the Nazas-Aguanaval priests crossed the line from preaching to actively supporting the struggles of La Laguna’s poor. In 1986, Batarse claimed that the turning point was the PP-led sanitation workers’ strike of 1973, when the priests appeared on the picket line in full priestly vestments and deterred the police from engaging in further violence against the protestors.<sup>73</sup> From then on, their participation in the popular movement increased.

Conservative media such as *El Siglo de Torreón* accused the priests of leading the *paracaidistas* (squatters).<sup>74</sup> A conservative pundit mocked the priests’ involvement with a satirical piece in *El Siglo*, stating: “And now people say they plan to invade the bishop’s house [*Obispado*], from which they could carve ten little houses of the right size.”<sup>75</sup> The truth behind the libel underscores the priests’ commitment to the people but reinstates their position as allies rather than leaders. On Sunday, August 26, 1973, Fr. Batarse stayed after mass with a group of squatters at the Prolongación División del Norte neighborhood. The situation was tense, as the squatters feared that the police would act to repress them. Batarse called Fr. de la Torre, who had a friendly relationship with the occupiers.<sup>76</sup> The next day the police received a tip from a local snitch accusing the priest of leading the occupation of vacant land. The accuser was one of the corrupt leaders of squatters sponsored by the PRI, which opposed forming an

71. Unión Femenina-Católica Mexicana, “Ciclo de pláticas en catedral,” announcement, *El Siglo de Torreón*, February 24, 1972.

72. Agustín Cerda et al., “A la opinión pública,” paid announcement in *El Siglo de Torreón*, August 26, 1972.

73. Riera Fullana, *Ejido Colectivo Batopilas*, 174–175. See also Arturo Cadivich, “¿Por qué intervino el clero en el caso de la Limpieza?” *La Opinión*, April 17, 1973.

74. See “Invaden terrenos 80 personas encabezadas por 2 sacerdotes,” *El Siglo de Torreón*, August 27, 1973.

75. Nau-Yaca, “De lo que el siglo informó,” in the column De lo que el siglo informó, *El Siglo de Torreón*, August 29, 1973.

76. See Jesús de la Torre, “¿Dos sacerdotes invaden?” *La Opinión*, August 30, 1973.

independent squatter organization.<sup>77</sup> This version of what happened became the most widely known, when *El Siglo* published a note taking the viewpoint of the *priista* snitch and the police. The police report and the priests' version in *La Opinión* contradict that version and help us to understand the true nature of the relationship between priests and squatters.

Around 1973, the relationship between these Torreón priests and the Maoists of PP evolved into full cooperation in support of peasants and squatters. The priests' political involvement infuriated the local oligarchy and triggered their persecution by Coahuila's state government. The state police put them under surveillance, beat them, and finally imprisoned them without trial.<sup>78</sup> Fr. José Batarse and Fr. Armando Sánchez became further radicalized during this process; both left the ministry to become full-time political activists, following on the actions of La Laguna high school students who left school to do the same. The Nazas-Aguanaval priests followed the path chosen by hundreds of other clerics during the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America: redemption through revolution.

## THE NAZAS-AGUANAVAL GROUP AND THE LATIN AMERICAN PRIESTS' MOVEMENTS

Between April 23 and April 30, 1972, the Chilean organization Christians for Socialism gathered Catholic clergy and laypeople interested in advancing a socialist agenda in their countries at the Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano de Cristianos por el Socialismo (First Latin American Encounter of Christians for Socialism, or PELCS). The encounter represented the highest point of the Latin American priests' movements and, for the Nazas-Aguanaval group, the culmination of its involvement with the Latin American network of progressive Catholics.<sup>79</sup> The Mexican security apparatus and the press carefully followed the meeting, at a distance. In early 1972, government agents reported rumors of an invitation sent to 20 Mexican Catholics (priests, nuns, and laymen) to attend the PELCS conference in Chile. Almost all attention centered on the bishop of Cuernavaca, Sergio Méndez Arceo. Rumors became a reality when

77. Bernardo Segura Gurza, Parte de Novedades, August 27, 1973, Archivo Municipal de Torreón, Torreón, Coahuila, Parte de Novedades Jefatura de Policía: Dirección General. Dirección de Seguridad Pública, Presidencia Municipal, 1973, box 39, folder 3, file 120.

78. For the reaction of the local oligarchy, see Cámara Agrícola y Ganadera de Torreón [Farmer and Ranchers' Guild] and Cámara Agrícola de San Pedro (Coahuila) de las Colonias, "A la opinión pública," a paid announcement in *El Siglo de Torreón*, October 26, 1976. Regarding the persecution of the priests and the position of Bishop Romo toward them, see Romo Gutiérrez, "Mensaje del Obispo," and Romo Gutiérrez, "A la opinión pública" [letter to the Mexican president and authorities].

79. Agents of the DFS surveilled the activities of Méndez Arceo from the late 1950s. See Sergio Méndez Arceo 1972. 2, April-May 1972, Archivo General de la Nación [hereafter AGN], Fondo Gobernación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS), box 78.

Méndez Arceo announced he would attend the conference, although not as a representative of the Mexican Church.

In parallel, a committee of Mexican priests and laypeople involved in social justice initiatives began to prepare a national report to present during the encounter. The report provided a brief left-wing history of the postrevolutionary regime, along with a critical description of the living conditions of workers, peasants, and indigenous peoples during the twentieth century up to 1971, and information about the emergence of a progressive faction among the Mexican clergy.<sup>80</sup> Its input came from a nascent organization called Grupo Liberación, which evolved into *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo*.<sup>81</sup> This organization took inspiration from the development, between 1970 and 1971, of various movements involving radical priests in South America: Priests for the Third World in Argentina, Golconda in Colombia, and Christians for Socialism in Chile. Some young priests, among them the Jesuits Luis G. del Valle, Luis Vidales, and Onésimo Cepeda, were behind the organizing effort for Grupo Liberación. The group had connections across 12 Mexican cities, including Mexico City, Monterrey, Torreón, Hermosillo, Poza Rica, Chihuahua, San Luis Potosí, Cuernavaca, Tepic, Zacatecas, Guadalajara, and Zamora.<sup>82</sup>

Méndez Arceo and the Mexican delegation traveled to Santiago de Chile on April 20, 1972. There, the bishop of Cuernavaca gave the keynote speech to an audience of young radical priests, nuns, and journalists in the hall of a textile union. For seven days, attendants discussed and debated texts from Catholic and Marxist authors, as well as from the Mexican anthropologist Rodolfo Stavenhagen. They listened to *nueva canción* (protest folk music) and drafted the final document of the meeting.<sup>83</sup> A correspondent sent copies of the text to the United States, where a complete archive remains, and soon an edited version circulated in English and Spanish.<sup>84</sup> The event gained visibility in the press: a brief article appeared in the *New York Times* and at least eight Mexico City newspapers covered the event.<sup>85</sup>

80. See Informe México, Union Theological Seminary [New York], Burke Library Archives, Missionary Research Library Archives 9: Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano de Cristianos por el Socialismo [hereafter PELCS], 1971-1973, box 1, folder 7.

81. For a short history of the group, see Young-Hyun Jo, "Movimiento 'Sacerdotes para el Pueblo.'"

82. Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Pueblo (Estado de Morelos), June 27, 1972 AGN. Fondo Gobernación. Dirección Federal de Seguridad, box 297.

83. Despachos del Secretario Ejecutivo, pre y pos encuentro, July 1971-September 1972, Union Theological Seminary, Burke Library Archives, Missionary Research Library Archives 9: PELCS, 1971-1973, box 2, folder 1.

84. For the English version, see John Eagleson, *Christians and Socialism: Documentation of the Christians for Socialism Movement in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975). For the Spanish version, see "Cristianos por el Socialismo," Primer Encuentro, Cristianos por el Socialismo—Documento final, *Servir: Revista de Pastoral*, June, 1972.

85. See Juan de Onis, "Assembly in Chile Urges Socialism," *New York Times*, May 4, 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/04/archives/assembly-in-chile-urges-socialism-group-led-by-priests-seeks.html>, accessed January 10,



In addition to the press coverage of PELCS, the example of Christians for Socialism repeatedly appears in Mexican intelligence documents that narrate the emergence of Priests for the People. Agents of the Federal Security Directorate (DFS) worried about the potential links between Mexican guerrillas, such as the September 23rd Communist League, and progressive Catholics. One DFS report even noted that the geographical zones of influence of the two groups overlapped on the map.<sup>86</sup>

Together, and with considerable journalistic detail, DFS reports and Méndez Arceo's private archives uncover a network of Mexican priests involved in a Latin American movement of radical Church politics that advocated for socialism. The Nazas-Aguanaval group was related to that network. Through their relationship with an Argentinean priest, they were the only Mexican signatories of the letter of Latin American priests sent to the 1971 Synod of Bishops in Rome.<sup>87</sup> Under the instructions of Pope Paul VI, the synod discussed the role of priests in the modern world and the subjects of peace and justice. Promoted by the Argentinean group Priests for the Third World and signed by dozens of other Latin American priests, the letter tried to influence the synod's discussions from the point of view of Latin America. They advocated for the political involvement of Catholic priests in the struggle for social justice and argued that local Christian communities should decide the specific terms of the priests' commitment to the "liberation" process.<sup>88</sup> The final document of the synod, "Ministerial Priesthood," recognized the duty of the priests in defense of human rights and the promotion of justice. Still, the bishops also reaffirmed that politics belonged to the laity and that the primary mission of the priests was sacramental.<sup>89</sup> The Mexican press focused on the synod's discussion of celibacy. It gave scant attention to issues of primary concern to *Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo* or the Nazas-Aguanaval group, such as workers' and peasants' rights.<sup>90</sup> Fr. Batarse used his media presence at

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2022; and Sergio Méndez Arceo 1972. 2, April-May 1972, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, box 78.

86. The area corresponded to the states of Morelos, Chihuahua, and Chiapas. *Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Pueblo, Clero*, 1978, AGN, DFS, box 297, 2016.

87. Jesús Moreno Mejía, "Carta al Sínodo: fue firmada por mil Presbíteros, trece de ellos de esta ciudad," interview, *El Siglo de Torreón*, October 18, 1971. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate the name of the Argentinean correspondent.

88. Ministerio Sacerdotal dentro de la Misión Liberadora de la Iglesia en A. L., September 8, 1971, Universidad Católica de Córdoba (Argentina), Jean Sonet, S.J. Library, Colección José María "Pichi" Meissegeier, S.J., Archivo Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo (MSTM), temas afines y posteriores, box 5, folder 19.

89. See Sínodo Episcopal de 1971, "El sacerdocio ministerial: texto definitivo aprobado por los obispos sinodales," in *El sacerdocio ministerial* (Barcelona: Centre de Pastoral Litúrgica, 2019), 31–32.

90. On how the Mexican press covered the 1971 bishops' synod in Rome, see Alberto Carbone, "Apoyo mexicano al celibato de los sacerdotes," *El Informador: Diario Independiente* [Guadalajara], October 5, 1971, front page.

the time to publicize the letter. He talked about it on the local TV show *Diálogo* and gave an interview for *El Siglo de Torreón*.<sup>91</sup>

However, the most substantial evidence of the participation of the Nazas-Aguanaval priests in this Latin American network is the story of their delegate at PELCS. The Nazas-Aguanaval group sent Armando Sánchez de la O. as their representative to PELCS, despite the objections of Bishop Romo. Instead of returning to Mexico after the conference, Sánchez de la O. stayed in South America for six months and traveled to Chile, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil. There, he became acquainted with many progressive practices among priests, from urban worker-priests in Chile to rural base communities in Brazil and Peru. Although Sánchez de la O. left the priesthood two years later, he helped connect Torreón's priests with their South American peers after returning to Mexico. He became an active militant of PP, working in the slums of Torreón and the surrounding countryside for a decade.<sup>92</sup> The contact between Mexican and South American priests' movements continued well into the 1970s.

In the weeks after their return from Santiago, members of the Mexican delegation at PELCS began publishing a bulletin calling for the creation of a chapter of Christians for Socialism in Mexico. In May 1973, the newsletter included a solidarity declaration issued by the Second National Congress of *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo*. A coalition of progressive priests from all around Mexico, *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo* shared members with the Mexican chapter of *Cristianos por el Socialismo*. They functioned as a forum to socially engaged progressive priests.

The *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo* declaration expressed the priests' support for the sanitation workers of Torreón who went on strike with the backing of PP militants and the "seventeen priests, who followed their bishop, and . . . opted for the people."<sup>93</sup> The solidarity declaration closed with a cartoon taken from a Chilean pamphlet that contrasted the alliance between the Church and the capitalists with the new coalition formed among workers and young priests to defend the workers' rights.<sup>94</sup> *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo* and many progressive priests in Latin America believed the time for an alliance between the working class and the Church had arrived.

91. See XHIA-TV, Canal 2, "Programación para el día 15 de octubre de 1971: 13:00, Diálogo en vivo: mesa redonda sobre la carta que trece sacerdotes torreonenses enviaron al Sínodo Romano," in *Avisos de Ocasión, El Siglo de Torreón*, October 15, 1971.

92. Armando Sánchez, phone interview by Jorge Puma, November 23, 2019.

93. *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo*, "Declaración en el II Congreso Nacional de 'Sacerdotes para el Pueblo' a las recientes luchas de liberación de los oprimidos en Torreón," in *Cristianos por el Socialismo (Mexico)*, *Boletín* no. 3, May (Mexico, 1973), 8.

94. See Secretariado de Cristianos por el Socialismo (Chile), *El pueblo camina ¿Y los cristianos?* Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, Santiago de Chile, 1972, 38.

## FROM BATOPILAS TO CHIAPAS AND BEYOND

In 1994, when communities in the southeastern state of Chiapas rebelled against the Mexican state under the banner of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN), it seemed unlikely that one of the paths that led to the revolt would have started in the community of Francisco I. Madero, Coahuila. As the parish priest who had served the local Batopilas vineyard since 1973, Fr. Benigno Martínez developed his pastoral work close to the rural workers and farmers of the area, with Fr. Carlos Zarazúa and former priest Armando Sánchez. In 1976, Batopilas farmworkers sought the priests' help in a dispute with the vineyard owner. The priests put them in contact with PP activists based in Torreón. A strike followed, and a coalition of students, squatters, and strikers took over the farm. The conflict lasted until 1984, and a combination of protests and legal actions resulted in forming a collective *ejido*; the former strikers became the owners of Batopilas. They worked the land in collective and shared the profits, they even cooked their meals and dined together during the first years of the process. Basically, they were a Cultural Revolution "commune" in Mexico instead of "normal" *ejido*.

In October 1976, under the orders of the governor of Coahuila and with the support of La Laguna's oligarchy, state police arrested Benigno Martínez, Armando Sánchez de la O., Hugo Andrés Araujo, and three Batopilas workers.<sup>95</sup> The event sparked the protest of Bishop Fernando Romo, the squatters, and the former national leader of the PAN, José Ángel Conchello. Conchello later publicly stated that the detention was "only a lesson to anyone who claims land and does not do it through the mechanisms of mass control created by the state."<sup>96</sup> The bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz, and the future president of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who had contacts in PP, visited the prisoners.<sup>97</sup> Also, Bishop Méndez Arceo defended the priests in his homily of October 26.<sup>98</sup> After a smear campaign against the priests in *El Siglo de Torreón*, the conflict became national news, with Méndez Arceo's intervention. It gained visibility through the pages of

95. "Serie de arrestos en Francisco I. Madero," *La Opinión*, October 16, 1976.

96. Olga Quirarte, "El Pueblo paga la lucha por el poder: Conchello," *La Opinión*, October 17, 1976.

97. Carlos Salinas had a long-term relationship with Política Popular, starting with his days as a student of Adolfo Orive at UNAM. Hugo Andrés Araujo, leader of Torreón's *brigadistas* and a founding member of PP, mentioned visits by Salinas and Samuel Ruiz as a sign of the diverse coalition supporting them in La Laguna. Hugo Andrés Araujo de la Torre, interview by Jorge Puma, July 30th, 2014. Samuel Ruiz was in La Laguna at the time, for a priests' meeting. See Sergio Méndez Arceo, Documento Confidencial, October 21, 1976, CAMENA, Sergio Méndez Arceo Archive, Personal Collection, box 72, folder 1.

98. Sergio Méndez Arceo, "Parte final de la homilía del Señor Obispo en la misa de 11:00 a.m.," October 24, 1976, CAMENA, Sergio Méndez Arceo Archive, Personal Collection, box 66, folder 1-22.

the newspaper *Excelsior*; and the newly created weekly *Proceso* narrated the event in its first issue.<sup>99</sup>

In the meantime, Bishop Romo and Benigno Martínez's parishioners from the town of Francisco I. Madero in Coahuila tried to pressure authorities to release Fr. Martínez and avoid Batarse's detention. Samuel Ruiz acted as a mediator with the authorities.<sup>100</sup> As mentioned above, a compromise was reached, involving the "exile" of Batarse to Chiapas, but not before the Church hierarchy faced the resistance of grassroots organizations that rejected the expulsion of Batarse from La Laguna. It was in their role as Catholics that the squatters' movement and parish assemblies spoke out to the bishop: "Like you, we are also concerned about the unity of Christians: That is what we seek! That the attacks of the mighty, the enemy, the exploiter, find us all united and organized against him to confront and defeat him, so we can then build a more just, more fraternal world, where we, the poor, can live with more dignity."<sup>101</sup> These words remain a testimony to the extent that PP and progressive Catholic ideas converged in La Laguna.

Members of PP followed Batarse in his exile to Chiapas and Samuel Ruiz's diocese in San Cristóbal. Thus, these northern Maoists moved into the jungles and mountains of Chiapas.<sup>102</sup> José Batarse returned to Torreón on April 23, 1977, and was harassed by the police soon after. On May 16, 1977, he was even taken by force by the police but freed late at night that same day. Forced to move again, he went to Tula, Hidalgo, where he worked with a PP brigade to infiltrate a PEMEX (Petróleos Mexicanos, the state oil company) refinery. Batarse entered into a relationship with a former secretary of his parish. He wanted to continue his ministry as a married priest, but he was forced to decide between priesthood and marriage. He left the priesthood and, for a short time,

99. The smear campaign included two cartoons. In the one that appeared first, the local and state governments appear as a woodcutter knocking down the tree of tolerance for the squatters. In the same cartoon, the squatter leaders are represented as a peacock, which looks at the tree with tears in its eyes. Enríquez, "¿Se cayó el arbolito?" cartoon, *El Siglo de Torreón*, October 19, 1976. The following day, a cartoon represented the town of San Pedro, Coahuila, as an older woman, worried by the protests of the squatters and the chance of a mutiny. Enríquez, "En San Pedro, Coah.," cartoon, *El Siglo de Torreón*, editorial section, October 20, 1976. For *Excelsior* coverage of the conflict, see Jesús Delgadillo, "Liberan a un sacerdote, preso por invasión de tierras en Coahuila," *Excelsior*, October 26, 1976. For *Proceso*'s coverage see, *Proceso*, "Sacerdotes comprometidos," 28.

100. *Proceso*, "Sacerdotes comprometidos."

101. Emilio González, "Al señor obispo Fernando Romo Gutiérrez, a las distintas comunidades parroquiales de la diócesis, a todo el pueblo de la Cormarca," manifiesto, *El Siglo de Torreón*, October 29, 1976. The same idea would resurface the following month in a letter from Benigno Martínez to Bishop Romo, in which Martínez analyzes the crisis and its resolution from the progressive priests' point of view. Sergio Méndez Arceo, 24. Carta a obispo Fernando Romo (Benigno Martínez), November 20, 1976, CAMEcNA, Sergio Méndez Arceo Archive, Personal Collection, box 72, folder 1.

102. On Batarse's presence in Chiapas and the impact of Batopilas in the diocese of San Cristóbal, see Jesús Morales Bermúdez, *Entre ásperos caminos llanos: la diócesis de San Cristóbal de Las Casas 1950–1995* (San Cristóbal: Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, 2005), 173–175.

was part of a PP brigade in Querétaro's Sierra Gorda.<sup>103</sup> In 1979, PP disbanded due to internal conflicts, and Batarse returned to Torreón, where he lived a modest life outside of politics.<sup>104</sup>

Shortly before returning to Torreón, Batarse sent a letter to the squatters of the 2 de Marzo neighborhood, requesting solidarity for the Batopilas struggle and begging them to keep the communal organization alive. He reminded them of their past efforts and compared the indifference of some with Cain's attitude when God asked him about Abel. In this one-page flyer, Brother and *compañero* (comrade) Batarse made a last-stand call to maintain an independent and non-electoral people's struggle at La Laguna.<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, the end of PP brought the retreat of the student activists and the gradual collapse of the independent organization in the neighborhoods. The remaining priests turned toward pastoral work, establishing Christian Base Communities to raise the consciousness of the peasants. Their work was cut short by the rising tide of conservatism in the Church and economic liberalization policies in the countryside.<sup>106</sup> In 1984, following Bishop Romo's retirement, the Nazas-Aguanaval group dissolved.

## CONCLUSION

The rise of a strong popular movement in La Laguna during the 1970s can be seen as a continuation of the long history of revolutionary mobilization in the region. The economic and social conditions of the area only partly explain the convergence between the transnational currents of Maoism and progressive Catholicism with the local activism of students and priests. This article shows the active role of the Nazas-Aguanaval priests in the introduction of PP's Maoism in La Laguna and Chiapas. The priests interpreted PP ideas as compatible with their preferential option for the poor, while PP activists took a positive stance towards progressive Catholicism and popular religiosity. At the end, the groups joined together because the urban poor and peasants without land accepted them as allies in their struggle for land. When radical students joined PP, they adopted the organization's political line regarding religion.

103. "Apareció el Padre Batarse; no fue secuestrado," *La Opinión*, May 17, 1977; Benigno Martínez, "Conferencia testimonial en memoria de José Batarse Charur,"

104. The PP collapsed over differences among the national leadership and the tensions derived of the Maoist tendency to empower local groups. When the original leadership renounced, the local groups continued working but the national organization ceased to exist. For a short overview of PP's collapse, see María del Carmen Legorreta Díaz, *Religión, política y guerrilla en Las Cañadas de la Selva Lacandona* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1998), 119–123.

105. José Batarse Charur, *¡Felicidades, por otro año más de su lucha!* (Gómez Palacio, Durango: 1977).

106. Benigno Martínez, conversation with the Jorge Puma, June 30, 2021. See also Concha Malo et al., *Cristianos*, 265.

Moreover, the students aspired to become one with the people and were ready to accept almost any ally in the struggle of liberation. Working among a deeply Christian population, a religious ally was a godsend.

With a history of almost two centuries of confrontation between the Church and progressive political movements in Mexico and Latin America, the wave of reform brought by the Second Vatican Council helped to create the conditions for the ideological realignment of an active minority of the Latin American clergy. The emergence of various movements of Latin American progressive priests, including the Nazas-Aguanaval group, is testimony to an alliance between the clergy and the popular movements of peasants and workers. At the same time, the 1971 letter to the synod of bishops in Rome and the 1972 PELCS are proof of the scope and reach of a growing network of Latin American Catholic progressives, and of the participation of Mexican priests in this network. The network brings to the fore how Catholic ideas and persons circulated and came into contact in Mexico and Latin America.

Whereas the interactions of the Nazas-Aguanaval group and PP with local authorities were clearly antagonistic, the relationship of the priests with the bishop and local elites was more complicated. The ambiguous position of Bishop Romo speaks to the realities of an institution that tolerated political diversity to a certain degree but was wholly against insubordination. On the other hand, Batarse's dealings with PAN leaders and his media presence reflect the priests' privileged position in La Laguna society. It all ended with the collapse of PP in 1979 and the decline of progressive ideas within the Church during John Paul II's papacy in the 1980s.

After disbanding in 1984, the priests of the Nazas-Aguanaval group continued their pastoral work individually, following the directives of the diocese's plan established by the new bishop, Luis Morales, who requested the dissolution of the group and its integration into diaconates. The Nazas-Aguanaval priests weighed the need to align themselves with the diocese instead of keeping a "sectarian" attitude and falling into isolation. They saw this change as an opportunity to transfer their experience into the work of the parishes. They continued supporting popular movements and forming Christian Base Communities, but the diocese's plan allowed them to overcome the tensions with the more conservative sectors of Torreón's clergy.<sup>107</sup> Their disappearance as a distinct group, their adherence to the new position of the diocese that

107. Benigno Martínez, interview by Jorge Puma, November 22, 2020. On the defeat of the popular movements in La Laguna and northern Mexico in the 1990s, see Aboites Aguilar, *El norte mexicano sin algodones, 1970–2010*, 224–242.

constrained political involvement of the priests, and the political defeat of popular movements in La Laguna in the 1990s ended their conflict with the conservative Church.

In the 1980s, the Church took a more conservative turn. Under John Paul II's papacy, it attacked the pastoral commitment to the poor that had informed the actions of groups like the Nazas-Aguanaval. Despite recognizing the deep inequalities and injustices present in Latin America, the Vatican condemned any attachment to the concept of class struggle and called for the unity of the clergy under the hierarchy.<sup>108</sup> These interventions signaled the end of the institutional conditions that facilitated the convergence of progressive Catholics and left-wing activists in northern Mexico. Institutional support for progressive Catholicism survived in Chiapas and Central America, but always under siege and without Rome's tolerance.

As this article shows, dialogue and cooperation between Marxists and Catholics in Latin America during the 1970s was not limited to the connections that developed between progressive Catholicism and liberation theology. A broader understanding of progressive Catholicism, based on examining the priests' movements in Latin America and their regional manifestations, such as the one presented here, complements existing accounts focused on the intellectual history of liberation theology. Further research should decenter the study of progressive Catholics from bishops and theologians while recovering the grass-roots dimension of Catholicism as the point of encounter between the faithful and those beyond the Church, such as the Maoists of *Política Popular*.

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108. See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation,'" August 6, 1984, [http://w2.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](http://w2.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html), accessed January 10, 2022.