Prophetic Politics: The Struggle for Civil Rights and the Ecclesial Experiences of Blacks and Latinos

Stephen M. Siptroth
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By: Stephen M. Siptroth*

I. Introduction

By all accounts, the black church was instrumental to the success of the black civil rights movements of the 1960s. Churches served as places where blacks could escape oppression and hatred, and experience the freeing effect of the Gospel and the solidarity of the community. The church was not only a place of refuge and community, but was also a source of political empowerment and political cues. The black civil rights movement succeeded largely because of the social power of the church and the church’s ability to inform, empower and encourage.

While the black civil rights movements had marked success during the period between the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Latino civil rights movement struggled to materialize during the same era. It was not until the mid-1970s that we began to see a stronger, more unified Latino civil rights movement. In part, the lack of cohesion and solidarity of the Latino civil rights movement can be traced to the Catholic Church’s lack of institutional support of Latino civil rights issues. The Catholic Church did not serve the same positive, empowering social function that the black church served, and due to its own resistance of immigrant culture and its unique ecclesial culture, was even, at times, antagonistic towards Latinos.

*Stephen M. Siptroth earned his Juris Doctor from the University of California, Davis King Hall School of Law (2007) and a Bachelor of Arts, cum laude and with Honors in Political Science from the University of California, Irvine (2002). The author would like to thank Professor Kevin R. Johnson for his feedback on this article. The author’s publications include The Correlation Between the Political and Ecclesial Ideologies of Catholic Priests: A Research Note co-authored with Dr. Paul Levesque, and featured in volume 66 of Sociology of Religion (2005), a peer-reviewed academic journal. The author may be reached at smsiptroth@gmail.com.
In order to explain the importance of religious institutions vis-à-vis political efficacy and empowerment, I will explain the spillover effect between politically meaningful religious participation and political participation. I will also explain how the institutional culture of a social environment can shape the values of participants. This discussion is important to understand how and why the church as a social institution operated differently in the black civil rights movement than it did during the Latino civil rights movement.

After a general discussion of the role of religious institutions, I will explain the social significance and historical development of the black church. Black churches provided freedom in a world that subjugated blacks with chains of slavery and racist behavior. Central to the black church, and to the black civil rights movement, is the black minister or pastor. I will explain the significance of the black pastor and discuss how Martin Luther King Jr. was able to emerge as the preeminent figure in the black civil rights movement. After applying the political participation theory, the reader will understand the political significance of the black church and of the black pastor, and will fully understand why a social movement successfully developed from within this social institution.

The discussion will then shift the experiences of Latinos with the Catholic Church in the United States. I will begin by explaining that the contemporary Church’s impassioned defense of immigrant rights and Latino issues is a relatively recent development. During the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, the Latino experiences with the Catholic Church were largely mixed. There are historical examples of a church that successfully promoted Latino culture and accommodated Latino and Hispanic
immigrants, and, unfortunately, there are personal stories of racist attitudes of individual priests, nun and brothers. Despite the varying experiences, the institutional church was hesitant to embrace the Latino civil rights movements of the 1960s, and it would take individual efforts on the parts of individual priests and bishops, coupled with grass roots activism, such as that pursued by Cesar Chavez, before the official Church would embrace the Latino civil rights agenda. In these sections, I will discuss the culture of the Church in the United States and explain why, using political participation theory, the Latino civil rights movement struggled to gain momentum at a time when the black civil rights movement was enjoying marked substantive successes.

It is important to note that the Catholic Church in the United States today represents the most powerful institutional ally of the Latino civil rights movement and of immigrant rights. The Church’s commitment to these social issues cannot be understated, and at no time in what follows do I mean to belittle the Church’s efforts in these areas. Still, it is important to authentically understand the relationship between the Church and the Latino civil rights movement to understand how important this institutional support is to the present and future campaigns for the rights of the impoverished, the disenfranchised, and the outcast.

II. Why Churches Matter to Minority Movements

Political participation is influenced by socioeconomic status, the culture of one’s social and professional environments, and participation in social groups. Political socialization occurs in churches, and church involvement influences political
involvement. In order to understand how churches impact mass social movements, it is essential to understand how political participation is encouraged.

**A. Theories of Political Participation**

Political scientists have embraced a number of theories to explain why people participate in political activities. The classical theory is a socioeconomic theory, which focuses on the correlation between wealth, education and class, and participation in political activities. The socioeconomic status model essentially explains that higher levels of income, class and education correlate with higher levels of political participation. ¹ Reaching beyond the socioeconomic status model, political scientists have more recently embraced spillover or carryover models which postulate that social and religious involvement and civic skill acquisition encourage political participation.

1. **The Relevance of Political Socialization and Decision Making in an Institution**

Carol Pateman, in her book *Participation and Democratic Theory*, explored the role workplace culture has on fostering political participation. According to Pateman, participation is an educative process, and she argues that fostering substantive participation in a workplace environment will teach the value of participation in decision making and ultimately lead to increased levels of political participation.²

Pateman’s analysis separates workplace environments into three distinct categories: pseudo-participatory, partially participatory and fully participatory. In a

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pseudo participatory work environment, workers are meant to feel as if they are having an impact on decision making in the workplace, but, in fact have no impact at all.\textsuperscript{3} In a pseudo-participatory environment, the feeling of having an impact is an illusion, as a decision has already been made, and the workers had no role in making it. In a partially participatory environment, the worker has some decision making power, often at a low level, but is not responsible for control over an enterprise.\textsuperscript{4} A fully participatory workplace is one in which each and every member of the working body has an equal voice in deciding an outcome.\textsuperscript{5}

According to Pateman, encouraging democratic values and participation in decision making in environments removed from the political process, such as the workplace, will ultimately encourage participation in democratic processes, such as voting, protesting, and demonstrating.\textsuperscript{6} Pateman concludes that these activities help to foster efficacy and perceived value in political activity and engagement.\textsuperscript{7}

2. The Civic Volunteerism Model & Spillover Theories

Recently a second model of political participation theory emerged—the civic volunteerism model.\textsuperscript{8} The civic volunteerism model was first explained by Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady. While the authors accept that socioeconomic status remains significant, they simultaneously methodically explain that what really matters is being exposed to social institutions which promote activism and political

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Id.} at 68-69.
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Id.} at 69-70
\textsuperscript{5} \textsc{PateMAN, supra} note 2, at 71.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Id.} at 103-111.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{8} \textsc{Sidney Verba, et al., VoicE and Equality: Civic Voluntarism and American Politics} 269 (1995).
action. The civic volunteerism model expands on Carol Pateman’s workplace model. Essentially the model advocates Pateman’s thesis that meaningful opportunities for substantive participation in one social sphere will spill over into the political sphere and beget political action.

According to Steven A. Peterson, Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, church participation has a spillover effect and directly correlates with political participation. That is, the more active one is in one’s congregation, the more likely she is to participate in political activities beyond the sanctuary.

3. Summary of Explanations

While there is no magic formula for fostering political participation, the theories advanced here are the most explanatory. At the core of each theory, though, is the fact that efficacy and perceived value in participating in decision making, generally, greatly influence participation in the political realm.

The base model of socioeconomic status explains that as wealth, education and class increase, so too does the likelihood of political involvement. Still, individuals lower on the socioeconomic scale may still be privy to significant social cues and pressures which will foster political participation. Indeed, the culture of social institutions, such as churches, workplaces and civic groups, would seem to play a more significant role in fostering political participation among the lower socioeconomic classes than among the

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9 Id.
higher socioeconomic classes. The culture found in these places may indeed be the deciding factor.

Carol Pateman’s democratic workplace model, Verba, Schlozman and Brady’s civic volunteerism model, and Steven Peterson’s spillover effect explain that civic skills can be learned other places, and that skill acquisition is the key to explaining political participation. Beyond skill acquisition, significant also is the culture of the environment in which one socializes and works. An environment which relies on the participation of its members, and which is molded by the collective choices of its members is an environment that instills the value of participation. Minority churches, then, play a significant role at creating a sense of political efficacy in the minds of congregants who are not privy to the culture of the socioeconomic elite which values political action and which insists on political participation in the democratic process.

B. The Political Significance of Religious Institutions

As explained earlier, Steven Peterson argues that church participation begets political participation. If we rely on this theory, we must assume that churches have a significant impact on fostering political participation and providing political capital.

Churches perform important social functions and encourage the formation of social identities. Churches foster a “common consciousness” and produce a set of expectations for members. According to Kenneth Wald, Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida,

11 Steven A. Peterson, supra note 10, at 123.
By participating in a religious group, the individual learns what is expected of him or her... the affiliate enters a world... that reinforces group awareness.  

Churches and religious institutions significantly increase mass political orientations.  The significance of religious institutions in the United States is made apparent when one considers that

‘...churches are the most widespread form of voluntary organizational affiliation in the United States...[and] secondly, a large number of individuals within churches are apparently ripe for conversion...’

Religious institutions are places where people of various socioeconomic classes learn civic skills and receive political cues.  The extent to which churches can increase political activity depends largely upon their ability to provide members with politically relevant experiences.  These experiences do not have to simply be political messages from the pulpit. Instead, politically relevant experiences include developing civic skills and encouraging participation in the political process.

Church culture, too, is important to understanding the “spillover effect”. There are two important categories of churches: the skill producing church and the politicizing church.  A skill producing church relies on members, as vital parts of the infrastructure, to perform functions necessary for communal and institutional survival.  The politicizing church is focused on offering a political message or agenda and providing

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13 Id at 91.
14 Id. at 533
15 Id. at 546.
16 Verba et al. supra note 8 at 18.
17 Id. at 385.
18 Verba et al., supra note 8 at 385.
19 Id. at 381
20 Id.
members with political cues.\textsuperscript{21} Skill producing churches hone skills members can relate and translate to civic skills involved in the political process, while politicizing churches tend to link the prophetic and the political, showing why participation matters within the context of faith.

The link between the religion and politics cannot rest simply on an understanding of the role of churches, but must also emphasize the role of clergy.\textsuperscript{22} Clergy hold a unique religious and social role, and are the primary preachers of political messages and providers of political cues. Thus, the religious leader—the pastor, priest, rabbi or imam—is central to the spillover effect.\textsuperscript{23}

\section*{III. The Black Church and the Black Civil Rights Movement}

The black church in the United States has been a significant centerpiece of black culture, and a means of escape from oppression. The black church was, and is, a place of familiarity, a place of homecoming, and a place of communion that society at large has never provided black Americans. The black church is the black people; the two are inseparable. Throughout history, the black church provided strength when society at large forced submission. Most notably, the black church was instrumental to the success of the black civil rights movement in the middle of the Twentieth Century. While blacks comprised lower socioeconomic classes, churches offered the support and social capital needed to successfully launch and maintain a social and political movement.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Id.}
A. The Black Church as a Seedbed of the Civil Rights Movement

The black church has been, arguably, the most important social institution for blacks in the United States. For blacks, the church was a refuge from a world of hatred and racism. According to Professor Peter J. Paris,

…black churches came into existence for the purpose of providing a space in which the race could experience freedom and develop those civic virtues that were denied to them in greater society.24

The black church began as a place where blacks could be enriched, engaged and enlightened. Black churches advocated transformation of the soul, a culturally-based interpretation of the Gospels, and revolutionary ideas which could change society outside the sanctuary.25

Originally, the black church provided a refuge from the ravaging inhumanity of slavery, and later became a sanctuary to escape a racist society.26 Black churches served as platforms for abolitionists during the middle of the Nineteenth Century.27 The black church developed as an organic part of the black community.28 Indeed, the black church “…was one of the few institutions left relatively free by whites in its development and modification.”29 The black church is an organization that expresses the fundamental

25 Id. at 86.
29 HART M. NELSEN & ANNE KUSENER NELSEN, BLACK CHURCHES IN THE SIXTIES 1 (1975).
values of the black culture at large, and “...is capable of being both secular and otherworldly.”

The black church was the first family many blacks had in the United States, and from its inception the black church had far reaching functions in the black community. So closely tied is black community and black church that they two are virtually indistinguishable. Professor Dena S. David, Professor of Law at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, argues that it is impossible to understand black political activism without considering the role of the black church.

According to Reverend J.R. Finney II, Pastor of Covenant Community Church in Birmingham, Alabama, the black church was “...more than just a faith community, it was also the center of social life.” Reverend Jesse Jackson cites five reasons why the black church was instrumental to the survival of black community:

‘...first, because it gave blacks a reason to live amid misery and oppression; second, because it nurtured the earliest forms of black collective economic self-reliance by helping to establish black banks and black insurance companies; third, because it assisted in forming black educational institutions; fourth, because it served as a cradle for black political emancipation; fifth, by its prayer tradition; and finally, by its part in the civil rights struggle.’

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30 John Brown Childs, supra note 28 at 19
31 Id. at 20.
32 Id. at 21.
33 Dena S. Davis, Ironic Encounter: African-Americans, American Jews, and the Church-State Relationship, 43 CATH L. REV. 109, 129-30 (1993) (stating, "It is simply not possible to understand the phenomenon of black political activism without coming to terms with the ubiquitous presence of the black church.").
While providing a refuge for blacks to come in from the cold of a racist and hate-filled society, black churches became places of social agitation and the spring boards of political activism.\textsuperscript{36} The social messages of every church would dictate how each individual church member responded to social pressures and engaged members.\textsuperscript{37} Despite differences between churches in rural and urban settings, and with small and large congregations, the black church anywhere was a place that provided social capital to blacks, and directly empowered blacks to engage in a struggle for civic, social, and political equality.

The black church was essential to organizing early marches, protests and activities of the civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{38} The black church provided a place of “social solidarity” for all people “caught up in its social web.”\textsuperscript{39} Rather than being an institution that was tasked by blacks to lead the civil rights movement, by virtue of its place in black society the black church was a natural seedbed in which the civil rights movement would begin. As well, it was a common religious identity, mainly protestant, which would allow the church-based civil rights movement to sustain itself.\textsuperscript{40}

\section*{B. The Black Pastor as Social Justice Champion}

\textsuperscript{36} Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, \textit{Race Politics and Community Development in U.S. Cities: Taking Sanctuary to the Streets: Religion, Race, and Community Development in Columbus, Ohio}, 494 ANNALS OF AM. POL. SCI. 79, 79 (2004). The author states:

\begin{quote}
As viable and progressive institutions, U.S.-based black churches have always been involved in the multidimensional mission of offering spiritual salvation as well as agitation for political, economic, and social freedoms from oppression.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{37} Id.


\textsuperscript{39} HART M. NELSEN & ANNE KUSENER NELSEN, \textit{supra} note 29, at 125.

\textsuperscript{40} WILSON FALLIN JR., \textit{The African American Church in Birmingham, Alabama}, 1815-1963, 145 (1997).
Of particular importance to the black civil rights movement was the role of the black pastor. The black pastor has been a central figure in the struggle for civil rights. The purpose of ministry in the black church is to “…nurture an alternative consciousness from the dominant culture and to evoke participation in God’s liberating activity.”

Black religious leaders permitted blacks “…to live in a culture of oppression without being crushed by it.” Throughout the civil rights movement, black clergymen were able to create solidarity by: fostering group identity through distinctive worship styles; forming “acting groups, committees or ministries within… the church”; leading “…impromptu responses to social crises…”

The black minister was not dictatorial, nor did he preach to or at the people. Rather, the black preacher preached for his congregation, and preaching generally reflected the needs, wants, and realities of the people in the pews. In this sense, the black church was a perfectly bottom-up organization. The pastor’s message reflected the consciousness of his congregation, and voiced the needs of his people.

Clergy in the black church held the oratorical power to free the people in the pews and to provide them with messages which allowed them to withstand constant societal oppression. The pastor connected otherworldly to immediate, and was responsible for providing a message that was both theologically liberating and contained cues for black congregations to retain their solidarity as they struggled outside the sanctuary of the church.

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43 FORREST E. HARRIS, supra note 41, at 79.
44 JOHN BROWN CHILDS, supra note 28, at 3.
More than being just a voice in the black community, the black pastor was often the most visible leader of social action. Indeed, black pastors were instrumental in the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Black pastors generally were actively engaged in the lives of their congregations and in the struggle for substantive equality in society.

One of the most charismatic and influential black pastors was Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. King’s rise to become the leader of the black civil rights movement was due largely to his ability to prophetically preach about black liberation and connect the social movement to the Gospel messages of Jesus. King’s ability to connect back to a Jesus that was black and provided the black soul to the black community was ultimately the key to his success as theological leader and social activist. According to Reverend Doctor Forrest E. Harris Sr., Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to show “…sensitivity to the inner and outer needs of the African American Community.” King was able to succeed as a black leader and to create a successful black movement by:

…linking up with black people’s authentic struggles, recognizing black needs, arousing black aspirations, legitimizing black expectations, [and] serving as the vanguard for the black demands...

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was an authentic leader that was able to be a voice of a people, and impress on society a face that would come to represent every black man and woman seeking to be treated equally in society. According to Reverend Doctor Forrest

45 WILSON FALLIN JR., supra note 40 at 145.
46 JAMES H. CONE, A BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION 37 (1986).
47 Id. at 37-38.
48 FORREST E. HARRIS, SR., supra note 41 at 21.
49 Id. at 97.
E. Harris, “…[t]he political personalism of King’s style of leadership, combined with prophetic radicalism, produced substantial social change…”

C. The Black Church and Theories of Political Participation

The black church was, and remains, an important social institution and a crucial element of the civil rights movement. The black church provided a forum of social engagement and discourse that was otherwise unavailable to blacks. Because the church was an organic part of the community, the church was ultimately self-policing and self-directing, and developed in ways that truly embraced the values and needs of its members. There was a shared social awareness by clergy and congregant alike of the social evils that plagued blacks in America.

The black church was both a skill producing church that relied on the involvement of the congregation, and politicizing church that sought to encourage black political action. As a skill producing church, the black church was able to provide the civic skills that congregants could take with them into the world to effectuate change through political participation.

African Americans are the most active participants in religious institutions. As a religiously active group, and due to the unique cultural and social role of the black church, the spillover effect, though not yet formally articulated by political scientists, was alive in the black community during the 1950s and 1960s. The prominence of the black church in black society ensured that blacks would have institutional support during their civil rights movement.

50 Id. at 97. 
51 SIDNEY VERBA, ET AL., supra note 8 at 317.
IV. The Catholic Church and Latinos in the United States: A Mixed History

Recently, the Catholic bishops have responded to the needs of immigrants and have brought to light the human implications of migration. From the late 1950s through the early 1970s, however, Latino immigrants lacked critical support from the institutional Church, and in some instances experienced blatant discrimination from members of the clergy. Instead of enjoying support from the institutional Church, Church and civil rights movement would intermingle in the Latino Struggle largely because of the efforts individual priests and bishops fueled by personal moral outrage. Additionally, Cesar Chavez would successfully court the Church’s commitment to the Latino civil rights movement through the use of non-violence and religious imagery that captured the Catholic imagination.

A. The Pro-Immigrant Catholic Church

During the final decades of the Twentieth Century and the opening decade of the Twenty-first Century, bishops in the United States have continued to affirm the value and dignity of the immigrant. In 2003, in an effort to bring awareness to the dignity of the immigrant, and to address the human impacts of migration, the Catholic Bishops of the United States and Mexico jointly authored, Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope. In 2006, Cardinal Roger Mahoney of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles vocally protested a bill before congress that would have levied criminal penalties against anyone

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52 The United States and Mexico Bishops’ statement Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope can be accessed online at http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml.
providing humanitarian assistance to undocumented persons in the United States. In the same year, Bishops in the United States were vocal critics of the Bush administration’s immigration policies and urged Congress to pass comprehensive legislation which would address the root economic and social causes of migration. Most recently, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops criticized the United States for not adequately addressing the welfare of immigrants. The Catholic Church today has also been likened to a force as instrumental to the immigrant rights movement as the black church was to the black civil rights movement of the 1960s.

While I will discuss how the Church was made aware of the Latino civil rights movement, and how Catholic social teaching and religious imagination was used to marry Church and Struggle, today’s Church remains committed to the civil rights struggle largely because Latinos are no longer considered visitors or passers-by. Today, Latinos are the foundation of the Catholic Church in the United States. Thirty-nine percent of Catholics in the United States are Latino or Hispanic. Indeed, one in five parishes in the United States has a majority Latino or Hispanic congregation.

58 Id. citing Survey commissioned by the Latino Coalition and conducted by McLaughlin and Associates' Opiniones Latinas, Washington, D.C., August 2002.
Additionally, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops indicates that 71% of the growth of the Catholic population since 1960 is attributable to Latinos.\textsuperscript{59}

The support of immigrant rights and Latino civil rights could be passed off as growing out of change in clerical and episcopal\textsuperscript{60} demographics in the Catholic Church in the United States. However, while Catholic clergy in the United States are more diverse now than in the 1950s and 1960s, Latinos are still significantly underrepresented in the clergy and the episcopacy of the Church in the United States. The most recent data available indicates that while there is one priest for every 1,230 U.S. Catholics, there is only one Hispanic priest for every 9,925 U.S. Hispanic Catholics.\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, only roughly six percent of U.S. Catholic priests are Hispanic or Latino.\textsuperscript{62} Additionally, only thirteen percent of seminarians, and fifteen percent of priests ordained in 2002 identified as Hispanic.\textsuperscript{63} As well, while the Church in the United States is over one-third Latino, less than 10\% of U.S. bishops identify as Latino or Hispanic.\textsuperscript{64} Clearly there is a representative divide between who sits in the pews and who presides at mass in the majority of American parishes. More importantly, while the U.S. Catholic Church’s commitment to issues such as immigrant rights has increased, it is not tied to a significant increase in Hispanic or Latino clergy.


\textsuperscript{60} “Clerical” as used here refers to the population of priests; “episcopal” as used here refers to the population of bishops.

\textsuperscript{61} Hispanic Ministry, \textit{supra} note 56 \textit{citing} USCCB Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs. Two-thousand, nine hundred Hispanic priests reported by the National Association of Hispanic Priests and by the approximate 46,000 priests in the United States reported in the 2002 Official Catholic Directory.

\textsuperscript{62} Hispanic Ministry, \textit{supra} note 56.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Id. citing} USCCB Committee on Hispanic Affairs. Hispanic Ministry at the Turn of the New Millennium, 1999, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{64} Hispanic Ministry, \textit{supra} note 56. The most recent data indicates that of the 281 Catholic bishops in the United States, only 25 identify as Hispanic. \textit{See} USCCB Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, The Study of the Impact of Fewer Priests on the Pastoral Ministry, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Georgetown University, June 2000; Survey of Priestly Ordinations, Life Cycle Institute, Catholic University of America, 2002.
It could also be claimed that the Church is responding to market forces which are drawing Latinos away from the Catholic Church to other ecclesial bodies, such as evangelical or mainline Protestant churches.\(^6^5\) However, seventy-two percent of Latinos in the United States still identify as Catholic. It seems, then, that the institutional Catholic Church’s support of Latino civil rights and social issues impact Latinos is due largely to two realizations: first, that human rights are important and are embodied in the very issues embraced by the Latino civil rights movement; and second, that the Church must respond to the needs of the people that gather on Sunday.

B. Church-Based Oppression and Suppression of Latinos

While the Church today is a vocal champion of immigrant rights and Latino civil rights, this support was gained relatively recently. During the civil rights era when blacks were privy to institutional support from black churches, the Catholic Church was largely silent, or present only in so much as an individual priest or bishop felt compelled to act on his own moral outrage.

During the Chicano/Latino civil rights movement, many activists criticized the Catholic Church for being disinterested in the plight of poor Chicanos which made up a significant complement of their congregations.\(^6^6\) In many places in the Southwest, immigrants faced overwhelming prejudice and racism from the Church and clergy. At masses in the 1950s in the Southwest, Mexicans were often segregated from whites, made to either sit in the back of the sanctuary, or required to hold mass in the church

\(^6^5\) In 2004, 23% of Latinos in the United States identified as being Protestant or Other Christian. See Gaston Espinosa et al., Introduction: U.S. Latino Religious and Faith-Based Political, Civic, and Social Action in LATINO RELIGIONS AND CIVIC ACTIVISM IN THE UNITED STATES 3, 6 (Gaston Espinosa, et al. eds. 2005).

Latino children in some Catholic schools experienced discrimination from women religious. According to Blanca Garcia, Secretary of the PADRES organization, Latino children

…were the last ones in line to eat… the last ones in line to


go down the fire escape… always sat in the back of the
class… were the last ones they called for an answer when

[they] had [their] hands up…


During the 1970s, Chicanos became irate at the disinterest of the Catholic Church’s hierarchy, and activists in Los Angeles formed Catolicos Por La Raza. Their criticism was that Catholic children were “…praying to La Virgen de Guadalupe as they [went] to bed hungry.” On December 24, 1969 the group confronted Cardinal McIntyre of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles as he celebrated midnight mass and demanded respect and resources for poor Catholics in the Archdiocese. McIntyre compared the group to “…the rabble at Christ’s crucifixion.”

There were other instances of Latino revolts against perceived oppression from the Church. In some instances, Latinos felt that the Church was antagonistic towards their struggle for civil rights. Due to a perception that the Church was stripping them of their culture and identity, Latinos resorted to symbolic acts of protest. On the Sunday following Christmas in 1969, approximately one hundred Latinos in Mission, Texas


68 Id. at 6.

69 Olga Rodriguez, supra note 66, at 42

70 Id. at 42.


72 Id.

painted a statue of the Virgin Mary brown. 74 In 1974 in Brighton, Colorado, Latino members of the Brown Berets occupied a parish and refused to leave or let anyone enter the church until the pastor conceded to their demand that a Spanish mass be offered on the Sabbath. 75

While there existed Latino clergy, dioceses sometimes assigned them to posts in which they could not minister directly to other Latinos. 76 The Church, in some dioceses, seemed to be focused more on Americanizing Latino Catholics than on serving them in ways that were culturally, socially, and linguistically meaningful. According to Father Juan Romero of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles:

In my first parish in Los Angeles I was not permitted to celebrate Mass or preach in Spanish in spite of the fact that 80 percent of the confessions I heard were in Spanish. 77

According to Father Patricio Flores who would eventually become the first Mexican American Bishop in the United States:

When I was ordained, I was sent to a parish where I was asked not to use Spanish to communicate with people who did not understand English. 78

By denying Latino clergy the ability to minister to Latino parishioners in their spoken language, the gap between clergy and congregation widened. Indeed, by adopting Americanizing policies and English-only policies, the Church was stripping Latinos of language and culture that was interwoven with the religious expression they once enjoyed.

74 Id. at 64.
75 Id.
76 Id. at 65 (reciting stories of Latino religious whose requests to be assigned to Latino parishes were refused).
77 Id. at 65, citing MOISES SANDOVAL, A HISTORY OF THE LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH IN THE USA SINCE 1513, 371 (1983).
78 MOISES SANDOVAL, supra note 73, at 65.
C. Accommodating Latinos: Marked Successes of Dioceses in the United States

Despite accounts of racist, bigoted, or insensitive behavior by bishops and clergy, the Church had marked successes at accommodating the influx of Catholics as they immigrated from various Latin American countries. One example of successful accommodation can be found in the response of the Archdiocese of New York to the growing number of Puerto Ricans in the City. Between 1940 and 1960 the number of Puerto Ricans in New York City grew from 61,000 to 430,000. Fr. Joseph Fitzpatrick, a professor at Fordham University who held a doctorate in sociology, was charged with responding to the growing need to minister to this population in the Archdiocese. In 1953 Cardinal Spellman opened the diocesan office of Hispanic Affairs, and sough to make New York’s clergy more “Hispanic friendly.” Indeed, in the era of the Latin Mass, Cardinal Spellman allowed Puerto Rican parishes to have one Spanish Mass on Sundays—a Latin mass with Spanish hymns and a Spanish homily. Other examples of successes include the hospitality the Dioceses of San Antonio and Amarillo showed to immigrant Catholics in the 1950s and 1960s. In these dioceses, individual bishops, dedicated to social justice, embraced cultural expressions of Catholicism that Latinos could identify with and which helped to bridge cultural gaps between church and immigrant.

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80 Id. at 264. See also DAVID A. BADILLO, LATINOS AND THE NEW IMMIGRANT CHURCH 78-79 (2006). The author writes: “Spellman played a key role in the development of ministry to Puerto Ricans…”
81 DAVID A. BADILLO, supra note 80 at 79.
82 AMERICAN CATHOLIC, supra note 79, at 262-263
83 One example of a cultural expression of Latino Catholics embraced by clergy in the Diocese of San Antonio includes Blessing of the Animals. See AMERICAN CATHOLIC, supra note 77, at 262.
Despite examples of accommodationist successes, the American Catholic Church was not immediately receptive or supportive of many Latinos. One significant problem facing Latino Catholics was the cultural divide between the Church in the United States and the Church left in the country of origin. In the United States the clergy and episcopacy were largely white and Irish. Latino immigrants arrived in the United States without the ability to celebrate mass with a priest who could identify with their cultural needs.84

The historical experience of Latinos and the Church in the 1950s and 1960s varies widely. By some accounts the church was no less discriminating than society at large, while other stories are far more positive. While Rite and Liturgy were available to Latino Catholics in the United States, the transcendence of the mass was not a source of political charge or empowerment in their immediate struggle for dignity and equality.

D. Church-Based Responses to Latino Catholics’ Needs

While there existed many instances Church-based policies of assimilation, and some instances of Church-based oppression of Latinos, the Church served as the foundation for some of the most influential social and political movements in the Latino civil rights struggle. Some priests and bishops sought to do more than accommodate Latino immigrants; they sought to serve Latinos and to respond to Latino immigrants’ social needs.

In 1949, Father Thomas McCullough, Father Donald McDonnell, Father John Garcia and Father Ronald Burke, all priests from the Archdiocese of San Francisco, realized that the Catholic Church was not serving the needs of farmworkers and formed

84 PADRES, supra note 67, at 4.
Mission Band. The group traveled throughout California and taught the Social Gospel to Latino farmworkers. Cesar Chavez would be encouraged to learn about the Social Gospel from the Mission Band. After an outcry from California Growers, the Bishops of San Diego and Fresno responded by criticizing the Mission Band as a group of leftist radicals and communists. In 1962 the group was ordered disbanded, and the four founding priests were ordered by their Chancery in San Francisco to cease from involvement with agricultural labor activities.

In 1972, Catholic clergy were instrumental in a labor strike involving workers of the Farah Manufacturing Plant in Albuquerque and Las Cruces New Mexico, and El Paso, Victoria and San Antonio, Texas. Farah refused to recognize union representation of the over 10,000 employees. El Paso Bishop Sydney Metzger supported the strike and elicited the support of Catholic bishops throughout the country, and ultimately helped lead a crusade that ended with Farah recognizing the employees’ union.

A final example is that of the Catholic Church’s Campaign for Human Development, the Church’s anti-poverty program in the United States. The Campaign for Human Development was politically active and supportive of Latino civil rights. For example, CHD provided the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund with grants to

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86 Id.
87 Id.
88 Id.
89 Id.
90 Id. at 101-102
91 Id.
92 MOISES SANDOVAL, supra note 85, at 102.
finance the campaign for Latino voting rights, and assisted in the development and creation of community programs aimed at serving the needs of Latinos.\footnote{Id.}

While there are examples of the Church-based support of immigrant rights generally, and of Latino civil rights specifically, many of these programs or groups were born out of the personal dedication of individual priests and bishops. The institutional church in the United States remained aloof to many of the needs of Latino Catholics during the period of the late 1950s through the early 1970s. The Church was slow to realize the importance of supporting Latino political activism.\footnote{The National Council of Catholic Bishops refused to support the international grape boycott of 1969, but, instead, created an Ad Hoc committee on farm labor. See Id. at 99.}

\section*{E. Cesar Chavez: Harnessing the Religious Imagination & Courting the Institutional Church}

One of the most influential Latino civil rights leaders was Cesar Chavez. Chavez was an American-born son of two Mexican immigrants.\footnote{Luis D. Leon, \textit{Cesar Chavez and Mexican American Civil Religion} in \textit{LATINO RELIGIONS AND CIVIC ACTIVISM IN THE UNITED STATES} 53, 56 (Gaston Espinosa, et al. eds. 2005).} His early life was plagued with tragedy and xenophobia, which followed him during his short stint in the United States Navy. After leaving the Navy, marrying, and settling in San Jose in 1958, Cesar Chavez met Father Donald McDonnell who encouraged him to read “…papal encyclicals on labor, and books on St. Francis of Assisi, as well as Louis Fischer’s \textit{Life of Gandhi}.”\footnote{Id. at 57} As a result of his relationship with Father McDonnell, and the inspiration found in his reading, Cesar Chavez began organizing farmworkers.\footnote{Id.}

While Chavez organized farmworkers without the support of the institutional church, he actively incorporated in his civil rights activities religious imagery and symbol...
that would capture the Catholic imagination. Chavez routinely used the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe as a symbol for all Latinos struggling to overcome oppression and endeavoring to secure civil rights.\textsuperscript{98} Indeed, taking a lesson from the Gospels, Chavez incorporated fasting into his civil rights activities, and after a twenty-five day fast, claimed that fasting resulted in a revelation from God.\textsuperscript{99} The revelation Chavez experienced was that the Church was a form of God’s presence in the world, and that the church’s wealth must be channeled to help the poor in the world.\textsuperscript{100}

Ultimately bishops and the institutional Church would support Chavez’s movement, but the courtship would be long, and the commitment of the institutional Church would be cautious. Chavez was successful at gaining the Church’s support by virtue of his nonviolent action which he based on Jesus’ example, and the spirit for the poor exemplified by St. Francis of Assisi.\textsuperscript{101}

\section*{F. Political Participation Theory and the Experience of Latino Catholics}

While there are mixed experiences Latinos in the United States, political participation theory explains the reasons why most Latino experiences with the Catholic Church would not be the type of experiences expected to fuel political participation. In the stories and instances described above, we see a Catholic Church that is at times antagonistic towards the needs of Latino Catholics. At times we witness a Church that is assimilationist, and I recount instances when the Church was accommodationist.

\addcontentsline{toc}{section}{F. Political Participation Theory and the Experience of Latino Catholics}

\begin{alertquote}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{99} Luis D. Leon, \textit{supra} note 95, at 59
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Id.} at 59, citing Cesar Chavez, \textit{The Mexican American and the Church}, 4 \textit{El Grito} 215, 215-218 (1968).
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Moises Sandoval, supra} note 98 at 99.
\end{alertquote}
Regardless of the type of experience—antagonism, assimilation, or accommodation—the experience is not one of empowerment.

Verba, Schlozman and Brady argue that in order for church participation to be politically meaningful, the congregant must receive a political message or learn civic skills. As an institution that was unresponsive to the needs of Latino Catholics, the Church did not encourage mass political action, nor did the church provide meaningful opportunities to learn and hone civic skills.

Carol Pateman advanced the theory that a democratic professional environment encourages workers to embrace democratic values outside the workplace. The Catholic Church is not a democratic institution, and during the late 1950s to late 1960s continued to embrace a clerical culture which held distinct roles for laity and clergy. Indeed, there existed instances in which the Catholic Church attempted to strip Latinos of their identities rather than cater to their needs and cultural wants. Far from being democratic, the Church was, and remains, a top-down institution that decrees the tenets of the faith.

Many Latino Catholics arrived in the United States wanting to continue to practice Catholicism in a way that made cultural sense. In many instances Latino Catholics were made to worship without culturally meaningful symbols and to listen to the Word preached, the Gospel read, and the mass conducted in a language that was foreign. Even when Latino clergy desired to minister to Latinos in ways that would be meaningful, the episcopacy in some instances refused to allow them to do so.

102 See Section II.B.
103 See Section II.A.1.
104 For a general discussion of Catholic teaching on the role of the Church, see RICHARD C. MCBRIEN, CATHOLICISM 655-688 (1994).
While some clergy supported immigrant rights and were instrumental in the struggle for Latino civil rights and farmworker rights, these efforts were generally pursued by individuals, and were not sanctioned by the institutional Church in the United States. Examples cited above include the Mission Band’s persistence preaching the Social Gospel and the cold response from various California Bishops.105

The Latino civil rights movement would rely on grass-roots political movements, and the individual efforts of priests and bishops who chose to embrace the Latino civil rights struggles before the institutional church dared to provide official support. Cesar Chavez would be as important and significant to the Latino civil rights movement as Martin Luther King jr. was to the black civil rights movement. However, he would emerge based largely on inner strength and personal spirituality, and without the same institutional backing as was enjoyed by Dr. King. Additionally, he would emerge from the shadow of a Church that was slow to respond to his needs and to the needs of his brothers and sisters, while Dr. King would lead a church that embraced the struggle of its people.

V. Conclusion: Long Trip Alone

While the experiences of Latinos and the Catholic Church during the late 1950s to the early 1970s were mixed, the Catholic Church most assuredly did not provide Latinos with the same social capital, critical social mass, political messages, political cues, or liberating environment that the black church provided to blacks before, during, and after the black civil rights movement of the 1960s. Religious institutions are critical social institutions which can foster political activism by providing social and political capital.

105 See Section IV.D., supra at 17-19.
The fact that the church experiences of blacks and Latinos differ significantly partially explains why the black civil rights movement accelerated and succeeded and why the Latino civil rights movement struggled to gain momentum during the same time period. For blacks, the church was something that grew from the community and which reflected their values, catered to their needs, and provided a place of refuge, comfort, and strength.

The Catholic Church, rather than being an organic institution which grew from the Latino community, was a hierarchical body, but one intimately intertwined with Latino culture. Latinos were faced with a Catholic Church in the United States that did not cater to their worship styles, and was hesitant to support their struggle for rights. Instead of providing Latinos with critical support, the unresponsiveness of the Catholic Church would require that support for Latino civil rights materialize in other forms, such as grassroots movements, in turn, resulting in a slowed Latino civil rights movement. Grassroots movements, and efforts by individual priests and bishops provided some critical assistance to oppressed Latinos, but it was not until much later in the Twentieth Century that the official statements out of the Catholic Church in the United States would be pro-immigrant, pro-farm labor, and supportive of Latino civil rights. Latinos in the United States, churched though they were, ever faithful, endured a long trip alone without much support from Holy Mother Church.

Now, with the support of the Church, Latinos have an institutional backer in the political game of human rights politics. With institutional support and authentic institutional representation of the needs of the immigrant, it is very possible that the Latino civil rights movement will continue to succeed in substantive ways. The Catholic
Church has officially embraced the causes of the oppressed Latinos in her pews that for so long sought Her strength, authority, and resources as foundations for their cause.