

Overcoming or Silencing Conflicts: The Catholic Church and the Building of the Costa Rican Welfare State

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Costa Ricans often describe their country as being unique. People on many places around the world consider their countries distinct in one way or another. Nevertheless, in a region, such as Central America, which has been constantly affected by dictatorships and civil wars, Costa Rica has been able to keep peace and a relatively high degree of electoral democracy during most of the twentieth century. At least in that sense the country is unique. Costa Rica does not even have an army as the armed forces were dissolved in 1949, never to have reappeared again.

In this lecture, I will briefly analyse the role of religion in the construction of the Costa Rican society from the 1930s onwards. I will focus on the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Costa Rican government. It is always difficult to speak about *the* position of the church. To avoid hasty generalisations, I will therefore limit myself to the public statements made by the Costa Rican archbishops. Even more concretely, I am interested in the archbishops' concern with what usually is called *la cuestión social* – the social issue. That is, their treatment of themes such as poverty and inequality.

Costa Rica in the 1930s

Let us begin with a brief overview of the Costa Rican socio-economical context in the beginning of the twentieth century. As in many other Latin American countries, political power in Costa Rica altered constantly between Conservative and Liberal governments from the 1850s onwards. However, towards the turn of the century, a couple of Liberal and decidedly anti-clerical governments had tried to diminish the economic and political power of the Roman Catholic Church in Costa Rica.

The means to reach this end included the suppression of religious education in primary and secondary schools, the introduction of civil marriages, the taxation and confiscation of church property, the secularization of cemeteries, and the closing of monasteries and convents. However, in the constitution, Catholicism remained the state religion of Costa Rica and the anti-church actions in Costa Rica during the last decades of the nineteenth century never became as fierce or violent as in many other countries in the region, such as Mexico and Guatemala. The Costa Rican church was just not that rich or powerful from the beginning.

For most Costa Ricans, the economical situation in the beginning of the 1930s was very harsh. With the increased production and export of coffee and bananas, Costa Rica had become a part of the World economy. However, unlike the other countries in the region, a considerable part of the production was still in the hands of small farmers. However, with the deep international crisis in the early 1930s, coffee and banana prices fell dramatically. This fact severely affected the country, whose economy totally depended on these crops. Due to the deep crisis, many small growers had to sell their lands to U.S. owned companies or to rich Costa Rican land-owning families. Moreover, due to the increasing poverty, strikes and violent uprisings became common at that time.

I will now turn to the reactions of the Catholic Church to the growing poverty and the increasing social conflicts. On the one hand, individual Catholic priests argued publicly for just salaries, and asserted that the State should protect the rights of the workers, not because of mere charity, but from Christian duty. On the other

hand, social issues seem to have been banned from the public pronouncements of Archbishop Rafael Otón Castro, who ruled the Costa Rican church between 1921 and 1939.

According to the Canon Law Catholic, priests should not be directly involved in party politics, and the church should keep itself outside politics. In his pastoral letters, Archbishop Otón repeatedly wrote that: “As long as none of the parties are openly hostile towards religion, the civil and political issues that do not affect the Christian law and Christian doctrines are outside our public supernatural ministry”

Of course, it is quite difficult to discern which issues were considered not to affect Christian law and doctrines, and which were not. Above all, this text can be understood as a condemnation of Socialism and Communism as well as anticlerical Liberalism. Nevertheless, despite the quite harsh anticlerical legislation in the constitution, Church and State relations in Costa Rica were quite good during the 1930s. As long as the church did not directly intervene in politics, the government did not enforce its anticlerical legislation. Overall, the government considered the Catholic Church a guarantor of national and cultural unity. In fact, both the government and the church argued that it was not possible to be a true Costa Rican citizen without being a member of the Roman Catholic church.

As we have seen, the Catholic hierarchy in Costa Rica maintained their silence in regards to the growing poverty in the 1930s. Instead, the archbishop repeatedly raged against Communism and Protestantism, which were considered the main threats against the unity of the country, and as two facets of secularization. The threat of Communism had been particularly visible through the foundation of a Costa Rican Communist Party in 1931, which came to have a great influence on the trade unions. In the view of the archbishop, Protestant presence in Costa Rica threatened the unity of the people, and would pave the way towards secularisation and thus to Communism.

Unlikely Alliances: Archbishop Sanabria and the Social Reforms of the 1940s

The real change of direction for the Costa Rican church came with election of the 42-year-old Victor Sanabría Martínez as the new archbishop of San José in 1940. Sanabria had studied in Rome, where he became influenced by the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, and earned a doctorate in Law. Before being elected archbishop, Sanabria was the national leader of Catholic Action, the church's main lay organisation. And as we will see, he was also well versed in diplomacy.

More or less at the same time as Sanabria became archbishop, Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia became the president of Costa Rica. Calderón was a medical doctor, who had studied in Europe and, like the archbishop; he was deeply influenced by the Catholic Social Doctrine. His political vision was the “doctrine of social Christianity”, which he saw as a third way between Capitalism and Socialism. Not questioning the Capitalist system as such, the state should intervene in the socio-political realm in order to implement reforms in favour of the deprived and poor, in order to establish social peace. The kind of state Calderón wanted to form was called the *estado benefactor* (the benefactor state), a kind of welfare state built on the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church.

The social reforms of the Calderón government between 1941 and 1943 included the development of a social security system, the fixing of minimum wages and maximum working hours. The laws all included workers' right to strikes and to organise trade unions. Though Calderón was a social liberal, he was certainly not anticlerical, but a devote Catholic. After several decades of Liberal anticlericalism, Calderón suppressed most of the old anticlerical laws that were introduced in the late nineteenth century. Consequently, religious education was allowed in the state governed primary and secondary schools. In fact, the teachers of religion should be Catholic priests, and this work became a very important source of income for the quite impoverished Costa Rican clergy. Protestant pastors were not given these possibilities, though the number of Protestants in Costa Rica was growing steadily.

From the very beginning, social issues became the focus in Archbishop Sanabria's pastoral program, and during the 1940s, a number of unlikely alliances between the church and left-oriented groups saw the light of day in the name of national consensus. In 1942, the Archbishop invited the leader of the Communist Party, Manuel Mora, for private discussions. Following the consultations with Sanabria, Mora announced the dissolution of the Communist Party and the creation of the Popular Avant-Garde Party, which was accepted by the Catholic Church. The archbishop also decreed that Catholics could be members of the newly established party, Mora must have succeeded in convincing the archbishop that the Costa Rican communists had nothing against the Church and religion as such, but only against religion as an ideological weapon against the workers. Thus, he agreed to dissolve the Communist Party and to drop its developed anti-church rhetoric. Because of the agreement with the Communist leader, rich landowners and other members of the opposition accused the archbishop of being a Communist himself.

The good relations between church and state continued during the time of Calderón's successor as President Teodoro Picardo, who governed the country between 1944 and 1948 with support of the Avant-garde party. However, during this time the once good relations between the Catholic workers' unions and the Communist trade unions broke down despite the mediation of the archbishop. The influence of the Communists in the government led to opposition from other groups in society. As a consequence, an unlikely alliance between landowners, social democrats, and the Catholic trade unions emerged. After a fraudulent general election in 1948, a civil war broke out. Archbishop Sanabria once again tried to mediate between the actors to avoid violence, but to no avail. The civil war was bloody but short – it ended after a couple of months.

The new government formed by social democrats and liberals wanted to continue the social reforms, but without the support of the ex-communists. The new Costa Rican constitution of 1949 included a couple of novelties. The army was dissolved, and all communist parties and trade unions were made illegal. In the new constitution, Catholicism remained the religion of the state. However, considering him a close ally of the old government and the communists, the new

government asked the Vatican to make Archbishop Sanabria resign, but he would stay in office until his early death in 1952.

After Sanabria: Optimal relations between Church and State 1950s to 1970s

A part of the Costa Rican national myth is that for thirty years following the civil war of 1948, the country lived a dream of electoral democracy, middle class prosperity, and that social services that expanded in tandem with a growing economy and an exuberant public sector. This thirty-year period was dominated by the liberals and social democrats who generally upheld excellent relations with the Catholic Church, now with a new archbishop.

There is a 1956 photo that shows President Figueres and Archbishop Rubén Odio Herrera, Sanabria's successor, inaugurating a new hydroelectric plant. I think that the photo is a perfect illustration of Costa Rica in the 1950s showing a holy trinity of the welfare state consisting of progressive technocracy, conservative Catholic morality, and state investments in infrastructure.

According to Archbishop Odio Herrera, the main threats to the Costa Rican political system came from Communism and Protestantism, which were considered the most potent foreign powers that could destroy the unity and the Christian welfare project of the country. To the prelate, Protestantism was particularly dangerous as it paved the road towards secularization, which in its turn would lead to communism. The new archbishop saw the power of the Catholic worker organisation as a bulwark against Communism. As we have seen, all communist parties, including the Avant-garde party were forbidden by the new constitution of 1949. By the 1950s, the party was condemned by the Catholic Church and consequently Catholics were not allowed to be members.

In the view of the government, the support of the Catholic church was essential to temper the criticisms of the more right-wing elements of the Costa Rica economical elite, who opposed the state's growing intervention in the economy. The church should also attempt to frustrate efforts by the left to gain adherents

through the Communist trade unions. In short, the government thought that the success of the Costa Rican welfare project depended, to a large degree, on the Catholic bishops' collaboration and support. In his pastoral letters during the 1950s, the archbishop showed that he had a clear option for the growing middle class and a less radical interpretation of the social doctrine of the church than during the 1940s.

During the 1960s, the new archbishop Carlos Humberto Rodríguez emphasised the importance of the continued "optimal relationship" between church and state in order to save the country from the "worldwide atheistic materialist conspiracy", both in the form of Communism and in unrestrained Capitalism. Therefore, the church refrained from speaking about political and social issues, and left that to the government. Thus, during Rodríguez's time as archbishop, between 1960 and 1978, he did not issue any pastoral letters dedicated to the social, economic, or political situation of the country. The silence on such issues was complete.

The new theological winds from Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops' Conference in 1968 hardly found its way into the pastoral letters of the Costa Rican bishops. Apart from pronouncements about liturgical reforms, the Second Vatican Council is hardly found in these letters. In many aspects, the Costa Rican church remained a pre-conciliar church until the 1980s.

Recent Years: A New Sanabria?

A new change in the state-church relations would come with the new archbishop Román Arrieta Villalobos, who became archbishop in 1979, when the Vatican forced Rodríguez to resign. Archbishop Román Arrieta was a Vatican II type of prelate, who had been a very socially active Bishop of Tilarán before he was elevated to the rank of archbishop of San José.

The change in tone was immediate with the election of Arrieta as archbishop. In December 1979, the Costa Rican bishops issued a pastoral declaration called "Evangelization and Social Reality in Costa Rica". According to the bishops, despite the welfare policies of the state, one third of the population still lived in

poverty. In this declaration and in various other statements during the 1980s, the social reality of Costa Rica was emphasised. They underlined that both groups, who considered themselves Christian, live in superabundance, while other groups who consider themselves Christian live in deepest poverty. According to the bishops, this injustice was a serious negation of the Kingdom of God. Moreover, the unjust situation demands personal conversion and a profound change of social structures. While the bishops always are very concrete in their description of the social problems that plague the Costa Rican society, they are enormously vague when it comes to the presentation of alternatives.

However, Arrieta proposed an agrarian reform, which he thought would improve the situation for the landless peasants. Following the Catholic social doctrine, Arrieta, in his pastoral, argued that private property was not an inalienable right. Property should also serve a social function, and there was a need to examine the distribution of land and the means of production. Of course, this project led to much criticism from the small land-owning groups. An underlying theme in many of Arrieta's pastoral letters from the late 1970s until 2002, when he retired, was that social peace was based on social justice. Without social justice, social peace was threatened.

To summarize this brief overview of the state-church relations in Costa Rica, I would like to point at four salient features.

Firstly, from the 1930s onwards, the Catholic Church in Costa Rica has not been as closely allied to rich and politically conservative land-owning groups as it has been in many other Latin American Countries. Instead, the land-owning groups were among the most vocal opponents of the church. For most of the twentieth century the Catholic Church in Costa Rica has been more allied with the middle class and the influential worker's movement.

Secondly, there has been a great degree of consensus between church and state. From the 1930s onwards, the Catholic Church has shown a remarkable malleability towards the governments. It has established good relations with both liberal and social democrat governments, and during Sanabría's time even with

the ex-Communists. However, as a whole, Communism together with Protestantism was seen as the major threat against the church and the Costa Rican way of life.

A third salient theme could be called “Silence in the name of consensus”. With the exception of Archbishop Sanabria in the 1940s and Archbishop Arrieta during the 1980s and 1990s, social issues have not been a major theme in the public statements by the Costa Rican bishops, despite the fact that a great part of the population has lived in poverty.

The last point I want to emphasise is that Catholicism has remained the state religion of Costa, though there is a great degree of religious freedom. Although, at least nominally, some 80 per cent of the Costa Rican population are Catholic, Pentecostal, neo-pentecostal and evangelical churches are growing and now make up at least 15 per cent of the population. These groups, and in particular the neo-Pentecostals have a clear political agenda, but we have only begun to see the affects of the pentacostalisation of Costa Rican politics.

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