

Vatican II and the School of the Americas Watch Movement

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The United States Army School of the Americas was founded at the beginning of the Cold War, its mission to train Latin American military and police personnel in “hemispheric defense” tactics.¹ The School’s curriculum came under fire as its graduates were implicated in some of the most appalling human rights violations in the region. An opposition movement formed in the United States, calling itself School of the Americas Watch (SOA Watch). Founded by Maryknoll priest Father Roy Bourgeois, the movement calls for the closure of the school and advocates a reanalysis of the US National Security Doctrine. As an organization, SOA Watch provides members with both a space to express their political opinions and concern with US policy toward Latin America and also with a venue in which participants can create an identity that privileges morality and religious beliefs over nationality. The arena in which this realignment occurs is greatly informed by the policy questions at hand, but even more so by the religious nature of the movement. The history of SOA Watch is deeply and inextricably tied to the structural and theological changes enacted in the Catholic Church in the 1960s as a part of the second Vatican Council, commonly referred to as Vatican II. Viewed as a religious, rather than a social, movement, SOA Watch represents many of the changes brought about by Vatican II—especially the academic and social justice movement known as Liberation Theology. After briefly outlining the terms in question—Vatican II, Liberation Theology, and SOA Watch— this paper will analyze some of the practical and performative reflections of Vatican II in the SOA Watch organization.

The second Vatican Council, called in 1962 by Pope John XXIII, resulted in enormous changes in the Catholic Church. According to Phillip Berryman, “ideas and proposals that had been cautiously advanced only in progressive theological circles were legitimized” by Vatican II.² The Church replaced the Latin mass with worship in local languages, and encouraged greater lay participation in liturgical ceremonies and the church community.³ The Council emphasized the need to make Catholicism relevant to larger populations, and encouraged the inclusion of local traditions in religious ceremonies and a greater

¹ School of the Americas Watch, *What is the SOA?*, <<http://www.soaw.org/new/type.php?type=8>>, (26 March 2005).

² Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) 16.

³ Pope Paul VI, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1963), 9, 11.

focus on earthly concerns.⁴ Furthermore, Vatican II encouraged Christian unity; Protestants were deemed to be fellow Christians rather than heretics, ushering in a wave of ecumenicalism.⁵ John XXIII died before the changes called for in Vatican II were finalized, and his successor Paul VI continued the work after John XXIII's death. In 1967, Paul VI wrote the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, which offered a "strong critique of the international economic order."⁶ This led many Third World clergy to define a "preferential option for the poor," stating that the church's role in fighting poverty should go beyond charity, and concern itself with structural inequality that kept some people perpetually oppressed.⁷

Vatican II had a profound impact on the worldwide church, but was especially important in Latin America. More than anywhere else, clergy heeded the call for this "preferential option" and applied it to their own lives and work. In some dioceses, leadership urged church personnel to share in the fate and suffering of the poor by living in and serving their communities.⁸ Intellectual growth and production coincided with this shift and a body of work known as Liberation Theology provided voice and justification for the clergy's actions and outlook.

These changes were no less than revolutionary. The Catholic Church in Latin America, to this point, had primarily served the urban elite. This realignment was justifiably construed as political, and in many cases prompted clergy and lay religious people to form, join or otherwise support revolutionary movements. Religion was a means to motivate the oppressed to act in their self-defense and demand rights that the church claimed they deserved. This process was central to the Liberation Theology movement, and took place on the local level all across Latin America. In some places, such as El Salvador under Archbishop Oscar Romero, Liberation Theology was embraced by the national Church's leader. However, as can be seen with the example of Archbishop Romero, adherence to Liberation Theology often resulted in

⁴ Berryman, 20. Pope Paul VI, 11-16.

⁵ Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 155-185.

⁶ Berryman, 20.

⁷ Flannery, 263.

⁸ Berryman, 23.

further oppression from the dominant powers, which, in Latin America, were most frequently controlled by the military.

Military opposition to Liberation Theology was apparent all over Latin America, but especially so in Central America. An organized campaign against the progressive church began. The aforementioned church leader, Archbishop Romero, was murdered by paramilitary forces after denouncing violence and oppression, the most well-known of the many who suffered for their allegiance to the theology.

The Church's shift from complacent to activist caused great concern, and religious groups and leaders were the targets of state attacks. With concern for national (and hemispheric) security as justification, many Latin American militaries tortured, killed, and kidnapped clergy and church allies in "counter-insurgency" programs. These programs were supported by the hemispheric power, the United States. The tactics necessary for a counter-insurgency program were a part of the curriculum at the US Army School of the Americas.

The United States government considered Latin American militaries as key to regional stability. While many parts of the church made a clear ideological shift to the left, the militaries had great incentive to prevent socialist programs from taking root. The U.S. government, seeking to prevent the spread of communism, founded the School of the Americas to train Latin American soldiers and police officers in military tactics, including counter-insurgency measures. The school was initially located in Panama, but was moved to Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia in 1984.⁹ It is one of "at least one hundred fifty disclosed training centers and military schools, where instruction is geared primarily to the needs of U.S. forces."¹⁰ While the school trains people of other nationalities, the implication is that trainees will act in the best interest of the United States. The school boasts having trained over 60,000 students. Of these students, seven became leaders of their country, although none were democratically elected.¹¹

⁹ Leslie Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press: 2004), 27-29.

¹⁰ Gill, 8.

¹¹ SOA Watch, *About the SOA/WHINSEC*, <<http://www.soaw.org/new/>> (15 April 2005). The leaders in question are Manuel Noriega and Omar Torrijos of Panama, Leopoldo Galtieri and Roberto Viola of Argentina, Juan Velasco Alvarado of Peru, Guillermo Rodriguez of Ecuador, and Hugo Banzer Suarez of Bolivia.

The SOA Watch movement was born out of disgust at the abuses perpetrated by these US-trained soldiers. At the beginning of the SOA Watch movement, the group did not know of specific ties between individuals who trained at the SOA and the most egregious offenses of Latin American militaries. Rather, the first actions taken at the school were a protest of the Salvadoran army in general, shortly after the assassination of Archbishop Romero.¹² As the group grew more sophisticated, they began to use the freedom of information act to gather information about SOA graduates and compared them to documents published by truth commissions in Latin American countries which documented the wartime atrocities. What they discovered was shocking: that SOA graduates were responsible for the vast majority of the human rights violations in the region. Thousands of SOA graduates were linked to the illegal use of torture, repressive force, the mistreatment of prisoners, inciting armed insurrection, drug trafficking, assassination and genocide.¹³ SOA Watch stood in vocal opposition to both the injustices perpetrated against their comrades in Latin America, and to the very existence of the SOA. What began as symbolic protests by a small group of religious leaders grew into a major movement, marked by an annual protest that draws thousands.

The intellectual and spiritual foundation for the SOA Watch movement is deeply rooted in Liberation Theology and reflective of many of the changes signaled by Vatican II. One of the major goals of Vatican II was to make the church relevant to the modern world. A number of changes were enacted in hopes of accomplishing this goal, but broadly, the church began to worry about earthly affairs and to get involved in social justice issues. As Vatican II postconciliar documents indicate, involvement in politics was encouraged and viewed as necessary, and these documents state, “‘politics’ can be understood in a wider and fuller sense as the dynamic organization of the whole of society. Understood in this way, it is something in which all citizens should be involved, actively and responsibly. In this regard, the work and activities of the religious assume a profound significance. They serve to stimulate and express their commitment to that cultural and social transformation which contributes to human advancement.”¹⁴ The

¹² Cooper, 1-4.

¹³ Derechos Human Rights, *School of the Americas Graduates*, <<http://www.derechos.org/soa/>>, (30 April 2005).

¹⁴ Austin, 269-270.

SOA Watch movement corresponds to this pronouncement, as it links religious responsibility with political action.

Like his counterparts in Latin America, activist priest and SOA Watch founder Roy Bourgeois sought to apply religious teachings to political decisions.¹⁵ By doing this, faith plays a larger and more relevant role in everyday life, a goal of Vatican II. Moreover, if faith enters in to political decision making, the church gains relevancy, another of the conference's goals.

Simple involvement in politics isn't the heart of Vatican II's message on the topic; rather, conflation of religious and political beliefs is supposed to occur because religious identity trumps political or national identity. SOA Watch provides members with a space to articulate this shifting allegiance. SOA Watch concerns itself with the well-being of people in other countries, who likely have little to do with the daily lives of SOA Watch protesters. However because of perceived religious ties to the oppressed people of the region, members of SOA Watch choose to support these people rather than the oppositional agenda presented by their own government. This allows participants to—purposefully and publicly--choose religious identity over nationalism. Religion informs the politics of the SOA Watch members in a manner that corresponds clearly with Vatican II.

Another of Vatican II's pronouncements was the recognition of Protestants as fellow seekers, rather than heretics. Ecumenical movements between the Catholic Church and mainline Protestant denominations followed. Through these movements, churches joined together to address issues that affected diverse faith communities and to recognize and celebrate the commonalities between groups. The Ecumenical Directory of Vatican II expresses the hope that "Catholics and their other brethren will join in prayer for any common concern in which they can and should cooperate—e.g. peace, social justice, mutual charity among men, the dignity of the family and so on."¹⁶ Moving past prayer, the document encourages joint social action, stating "it is up to these Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility, and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of good will to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the

¹⁵ Cooper, 17.

¹⁶ Austin, 160.

social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed.”¹⁷ Fostering relationships between Catholics and Protestants was one of the most revolutionary aspects of Vatican II. The SOA Watch movement responds to this formula for ecumenical action.

The SOA Watch movement has its origins in the Catholic Maryknoll order. After serving as a parish priest in Latin America, founder Roy Bourgeois was assigned to education and traveled around the United States to talk about social justice issues to Catholic groups. From this base, he drew more participants for his demonstrations and civil disobedience campaigns. As religious people of different denominations learned about the SOA, they found that “taking on the SOA was an extension of the work that many had already begun. It flowed from their sense of moral outrage, the violation of their deeply held Christian beliefs, and a shared and enduring commitment to progressive social change.”¹⁸ As the movement gained attention, it became ecumenical in nature.

While the original leadership of SOA Watch was overwhelmingly Catholic, a United Methodist Church pastor has held the second-highest position in the organization for more than a decade. The Reverend Carol Richardson, who was serving as the national grassroots coordinator for Witness for Peace, joined the movement in the early 1990s, at the urging of her Witness for Peace constituents.¹⁹ She was largely responsible for mobilizing the Central American solidarity movement to the SOA Watch cause, and had the organizing skills necessary to make it a national movement.²⁰ Richardson’s role demonstrates clearly the ecumenical nature of the group; she not only altered the organization’s leadership, but also engaged the diverse coalition of Witness for Peace members.

The ecumenical nature of the SOA Watch movement brought the initially Catholic group a diverse perspective and a much larger constituency. However, SOA Watch, in a manner similar to the Central American solidarity movements, brought a Catholic theology to an ecumenical audience. Liberation Theology, as explained by Gustavo Gutierrez, is a Catholic theology that arose from changes in the Catholic Church. However, through these movements, the ideas expressed in Liberation Theology reached

¹⁷ Austin, 175.

¹⁸ Gill, 203.

¹⁹ Gill, 208.

²⁰ Cooper, 173.

a larger audience that was uniquely able to understand it based on the ecumenical ties created by the SOA Watch movement and the focus on religious, rather than national, identity that the movement demanded.

In Vatican II's search to make the church more relevant to the modern world, another aspect of traditional Catholic practice was revolutionarily changed: worship. Vatican II called for the reform of many aspects of worship, and one change was the recognition and support of ecumenical services. However, the base of Catholic worship, the liturgy, was also greatly changed. Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy called for several things, including the involvement of lay people in the celebration of the liturgy. The document states that, "In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which all faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit."²¹ It is my opinion that the protests organized by the SOA Watch movement are a type of worship, albeit a non-traditional one. I believe that part of the movement's success is drawn from the active participation of lay people in these highly symbolic protest events. These events enfranchise participants by allowing them to march alongside religious leaders, and allowing them to feel like a key part in a critical mass.

Although SOA Watch has a lobbying office in Washington D.C. and an active presence on the internet, the most important event is the organization's annual protest march in Columbus, Georgia, at the site of the School of the Americas. SOA Watch protests are attended by thousands of people from all over the United States and Latin America.²² The event is centered on a march to the military base, at which point some SOA Watch members "cross the line" and illegally enter the facility. Those that cross the line are often prosecuted, and many serve time in federal prisons for their act of civil disobedience. This action allows SOA Watch members to suffer in solidarity with their brethren in Latin America, who also face religious persecution. The sacrifice involved in facing arrest and a prison sentence is offered by many SOA Watch members as religious service, and many use imprisonment as a time of religious reflection.²³ It also allows SOA Watch members an opportunity to assert their religious identity in the church/state conflict

²¹ Pope Paul VI, 9.

²² Gill, 209.

²³ Cooper, 2-10. Gill offers the following opinion of an SOA instructor, who "complained bitterly in 1999 about an elderly nun who was scheduled to be released and who would, he remarked sarcastically, 'go on the lecture circuit' with her stories," (Gill, 213).

outlined by the movement, and to be active participants in a religious movement, regardless of their role in the institutional church.

Another event that is central to the protest is a funeral procession in honor of all those who have died at the hands of School of the Americas graduates. In this procession, all the protesters march to the gates of Fort Benning carrying white crosses that bear the names of murdered Latin Americans and solidarity workers. A speaker reads the names of dead, and “after each name, a single drum beat sounded, and the crowd chanted ‘*presente*’.”²⁴ I believe that this communal action also reflects Vatican II’s goal to have lay people more involved in organized worship. In addition to the protesters, equal “participants” in the event are the names on the crosses—most of whom died from religious persecution but were not members of the clergy. These martyrs are the reason the event exists, and people who have attended the protest say that this is the most moving event that SOA Watch coordinates. While the participation of lay people in the SOA Watch protests is inspirational, I believe that for the movement these martyrs are the “primary and indispensable source from which all faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”²⁵

More than just allow greater lay participation in the liturgy, Vatican II called for the reform of liturgy to better reflect the lives of Catholics. The Latin Mass was replaced by mass in local languages, and it was suggested that local customs be incorporated into worship, if they corresponded with church doctrine. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy explains the suggestion, saying:

Even in the liturgy, the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community; rather does she respect and foster the genius and talents of the various races and peoples. Anything in these peoples’ way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error she studies with sympathy and, if possible, preserves intact. Sometimes in fact she admits such things into the liturgy itself, so long as they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit.²⁶

This directive calls for reform within the church, and an emphasis on inclusion of relevant customs. This aspect of Vatican II also furthered the inclusion of secular concerns in church work, in that it allowed different issues and ideas to be brought into worship.

²⁴ Gill, 199.

²⁵ Pope Paul VI, 9.

²⁶ Pope Paul VI, 11.

The SOA Watch movement drew on this directive, and in its protests constructed a new kind of worship that concerned itself with politics and earthly affairs. This worship admitted aspects of earlier social movements that proved relevant to the cause at hand, specifically the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Central American Solidarity movement. Bourgeois and other religious leaders consciously constructed ceremonial events that would resonate with religious people, but prove relevant in its addressing of world violence.²⁷ I believe that this conflation of earthly concerns and religious ceremony is inspired by Vatican II and supported by the Council's teaching.

SOA Watch offers a rubric for social action by a post-Vatican II religious community. Drawing on Liberation Theology, ecumenicalism and worship reform, SOA Watch grew into a broad movement, utilizing symbolic protests and civil disobedience to express moral indignation at the US Army and government's actions. However, as the movement grew, the protests became more than ecumenical gatherings and began to attract people from secular protest backgrounds, who infused the movement with differing opinions and protest styles.²⁸ Especially since 2001, tensions have been apparent between the old guard's religious orientation and the younger protesters' "exuberant style...grounded in anarchist organizing principles."²⁹ However, the movement is still attracting the attention of many people, and the November 2004 protest drew over 16,000 people, more than any event since the organization's inception.³⁰ Moreover, the movement has persisted even after the closing of the School of the Americas.

In January 2001, after nearly two decades of protests organized by Bourgeois, the US Army conceded to pressure from the opposition movement and closed the School of the Americas. However, this change was, much like the opposition movement itself, highly symbolic. The School of the Americas was reopened the same day it was closed as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.³¹ The

²⁷ Cooper, 133.

²⁸ Bruce Triggs, "Globalizing SOA Watch" in *The Global Activist's Manual: Local Ways to Change the World*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002).

²⁹ Gill, 230.

³⁰ School of the Americas Watch, *Update from the Gates of Fort Benning*, <http://www.soaw.org/new/newswire_detail.php?id=598>, (15 April 2005).

³¹ School of the Americas Watch, *Critique of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation*, <<http://www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=260>>, (26 March 2005).

curriculum remains largely the same, as does its goal, “training proxy forces that can intervene in Latin American affairs and carry out U.S. objectives.”³² Despite this fact, the opposition movement has remained strong, although it has evolved from the small group of religious activists that founded it. Its members have also used SOA Watch as a means to build coalitions between social justice groups, and to address new developments that concern SOA Watch members; for example, when US directed war against Iraq was imminent, SOA Watch leaders traveled to Iraq with members of other religious and secular groups.³³ SOA Watch continues to evolve and grow, trying to stay relevant and faithful to its cause: the defense of those being attacked by the US military and government, especially those in Latin America. The evolution is a part of a natural process, that an organization must change with the times to stay relevant to its members. This lesson can be learned many places, but for SOA Watch members, perhaps best of all from Vatican II.

³² Cooper, 206.

³³ Cooper, 218-22.

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