

ICONOCLASM AND HISTORY:
Remembering the Via Crucis in a Nicaraguan
comunidad eclesial de base

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a consideration of religious ritual as historical practice, and of the cultural mediation of the valuation and revaluation of signs in history. Specifically I am concerned with christological imagery as deployed in the performance of a Via Crucis Nicaraguense, or "Stations of the Cross," conducted by a comunidad eclesial de base (CEB) in Managua, Nicaragua in 1976, and 1977. The 'data' include texts and illustrations employed during the performance, as well as the recollections of participants among whom I conducted a field study in 1984.

CEBs are the socio-ecclesiastical units that practice what has come to be known as 'Liberation theology'. They constitute active bases of resistance in many areas of Latin America and are involved in a transformative 'Christian praxis' that emerges at the cusp of a narrativized tradition rooted in Church practice and a developing 'folk-Marxism' informing CEB exegesis. Over and against CEB members' claim to an unmediated historical analysis of the biblical moment as recovered in the performance of the Via Crucis, my effort in this paper is to point to additional cultural resonances at play in this ritual of resistance.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce papier considère le rituel religieux comme pratique historique, et comme médiation culturelle de la valuation et revaluation des signes dans le cours de l'histoire. L'auteur est concerné spécifiquement par l'imagerie christologique déployée dans la performance de Via Crucis Nicaraguense, produite par une comunidad eclesial de base (CEB) a Managua, Nicaragua en 1976 et 1977. Les données incluent les textes et illustrations utilisées dans

le rituel, ainsi que les récollections des participants, cueillies en 1984.

Les CEB sont des unités socio-ecclésiastiques qui pratiquent la Théologie de la Liberté. Ce sont des bases de résistance dans beaucoup de régions en Amérique Latine, qui transforment la pratique Chrétienne en "marxisme populaire". L'auteur examine les facteurs culturels subtils qui ont été incorporés dans le rituel de résistance du Via Crucis.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a consideration of religious narrative and historical practice. More precisely, it is an examination of the merging of the two as evoked through ritual performance. The context is the performance of the Via Crucis Nicaraguenses: an enactment of and reflection upon the Christian narrative of Jesus' Passion, as it was performed in a barrio in eastern Managua in 1976, '77 and '79. In the enactment of the Via Crucis, or "Stations of the Cross", the biblical narrative is commonly broken down into 12 or 15 events or 'stations'. The performance reconstitutes the narrative by moving from one station to the next. Pictorial and textual representations of these stations can often be found on the walls of Churches, organizing the space of worship with the temporal structure of religious narrative. During Christian Holy Week celebrations in Latin America and elsewhere, the stations are enacted on the streets of the local communities.

The Via Crucis considered here was performed by a comunidad eclesial de base ('basic Christian community' or CEB). CEBs are the socio-ecclésiastical units that practice what has come to be known as Latin American Liberation Theology. Christians involved in these communities tend to see themselves as among the vanguard of a transformative social movement: a movement engaged in the overturning of 'institutional structures of sin' to the end of establishing "partial realizations of the Kingdom of God" (Gutierrez, 1973). CEBs thus constitute active bases of resistance in many areas of Latin America. In the case of the parish of San Pablo Apostle¹ where I worked, they were among the first organized groups in Managua to be contacted (in 1975-6) by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), and along with other such CEBs formed an integral part of the urban infrastructure of the Frente in Managua² (see also Dodson 1982-7). The Via Crucis

considered here was enacted during this period of emerging alliance with the armed struggle of the FSLN.

The 'data' consist of a 'study guide' used during the ritual³, as well as the recollections of some of the participants among whom I conducted research in 1984. The man who showed me the guide -- a leader of the CEB, and one of its original members -- described it as "very strong", and explained that it so enraged the National Guardsmen (who frequently observed and harassed the community) that one year -- 1978 -- it could not be performed. The Via Crucis study guide describes fifteen stations, moving through Jesus' trial, his carrying of his cross, his crucifixion, death and resurrection. Each station in the guide is illustrated with an image, beneath which is printed the title of the station, followed by a biblical passage (Fig. 1). Each image is further accompanied by a text (Fig. 2) consisting of a lectura: another reading from the bible; a commentario (commentary): an analysis of the biblical moment invoked by the station, and a discussion of that moment's continuity or replication in the present experience of the participants; and an oracion: a prayer, invariably asking forgiveness for individuals and for the community for having allowed the injustice suffered by Jesus to continue today. This is followed by the entire group asking forgiveness in unison: "perdon Senor, perdon".

In the discussion that follows I hope to consider the Via Crucis as a ritual of resistance: as formalized (ritualized) expression of the transformed Christian identity declared by the CEB members, and as a transformation of a traditional ritual form through which new potentials for meaning are constituted and expressed. These meanings are held by CEB members to be embedded in Christian narrative, accessible through specific forms of exegesis, speaking to specific historical experience. As ritual practice the Via Crucis encodes this dialectic of exegesis and experience, collapsing the distinction between the biblical moment being ritually reenacted and the historical moment of the ritual performance, while situating the ritual performers as actors within a field of meaning apparently grounded in religious narrative. In this essay I will be concerned, first, to evoke the interpretive strategy declared to me by community members and, second, to contextualize this approach to Christian meaning within a wider analysis of CEB identity and practice. Such an analysis will lead us beyond the formally declared strategy of community members to consider additional orders of signification set in motion by CEB ritual practice. Moving between this discussion and the Via Crucis text, I hope to begin to examine the ways in which the narrative tradition is subject to semantic and

pragmatic reevaluation by the expressive acts that claim to reproduce it most faithfully.

I: HISTORY AND FAITH (IN HISTORY)

Among the most striking aspects of the CEB reading of the Passion narrative is their historicizing of the religious sign 'Jesus', with the apparent result of secularizing its materially determined referent. In various ways, CEB members declared to me their ability to retrieve the historical moment chronicled by the biblical text, by analyzing the material reality of Jesus' experience as an historical actor. A woman from the CEB recalls one of the themes discussed in the initiation process for new members:

The first theme was Christ: man or spirit? Did he need to eat, did he need to work, did he have a family? ... Yes. He was flesh ... the Bible tells us this. He had a family and a job. He was hungry, thirsty, tired ... In the same way, we have to work for changes that He wants, and feel these things along the way. There are some who think he was Spirit and who wait for miracles. The miracles won't happen by themselves.

Similarly, a printed study guide⁴ used by the CEB during Holy Week 1977 notes that 'Christ' did not die, but was killed, and offers a list of Jesus' iconoclastic messages and methods that set the 'authorities' of his time against him:

All this makes us see in Jesus a man who identified with his people, with their problems. A man who lived an historical moment in historically determined circumstances. If he were alive today, he would die in another way, but always defending the same cause. Perhaps he would be disappeared, he would be shot, they would torture him ...

Such statements reflect the exegetical tradition formally declared to me by CEB members, who find in their historicized reading of biblical narrative a seemingly transparent or 'demystified' rendering of scriptural meaning. This emphasis is characteristic of the theologies of liberation associated with the CEBs and can be traced to the various Post-Enlightenment 'quests' for the 'historical Jesus'.⁵ Of particular note to this discussion is the confluence in the CEBs

of what has been cast as the historicizing tradition of the New Testament (see, for instance, Kermode 1979:101-123) with a clear privileging of 'Marxist analysis', which informs much of the social critique found in 'Liberation Theology' proper.⁶

Within contemporary Latin American theology there is a strong emphasis upon history, or upon 'historical knowing' as a medium of witness to Christian meaning. These theologians argue against certain traditional theological conceptions that posit a level of profane human history as distinct from the history of salvation they believe to be unfolding (eg. Assman 1976; Gutierrez 1973; Miguez Bonino 1984, 1975:132-153). Rather, 'theologians of liberation' tend to maintain that revelation is ongoing and within the bounds of 'human history'. Witnessing this activity becomes a question of faith and methodology, and there is a growing interest among Latin American theologians in the analytical tools of sociology and the political sciences as they can be applied to a reading of the signs of the times. Such 'tools' are equally applicable to the Bible, which emerges as a uniquely privileged witness to a number of specific historical moments. These moments retain a 'reserve of meaning' activated but not changed by reflection from a particular socio-historical vantage point (Miguez Bonino 1984:4).

II: CONSCIENTIZACION

The second station of the Via Crucis, titled: "Jesus Burdened with the cross", is accompanied by an illustration of a barefoot man bent under the weight of a tremendous cross (Fig. 4). His face is covered by his arm which supports the cross on his shoulder. The 'meaning' of the cross borne by this faceless 'Jesus' is inscribed on the image itself: "Arbitrary Arrests", "Repression", "Rapes", "Murder". Along the base of the cross is written Dictadura Militar Som ... The remainder of the third word (implied: "Somoza", or "Somocista") is obscured by the body of 'Jesus'.⁷ Whether the reticence of the image stems from pragmatic concerns⁷ or from more subtle intentions of the artist/theologian, I take the reading of its meaning as an apt native model for the exegesis undertaken at the CEB level.

At issue is more than the connotation of Jesus' passion in terms of Nicaraguans' experiences of dictatorship, or the emplotment of contemporary Nicaraguan experience within the field of biblical narrative. For these acts of emplotting or connoting entail an overturning of sign relationships, rejections of common

understanding, acts of resistance. Decoding the Via Crucis iconography to realize this most potent connection implied by the ritual, CEB members draw upon a newly emergent 'subversive' understanding of the significance of Jesus. In their reading of the signs of their time, CEB members appropriate the signs of another time. Giving voice to these new-found resonances of Christian chronicle entails here literally seeing through the sign 'Jesus' to read "Somoza" written on the cross.

I offer this as an analogy to a process central to the CEB experience: conscientizacion (roughly 'consciousness-raising'; "conscientization"). Taken from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, conscientization became, after 1969, the initiation process for the CEBs of San Pablo Apostle. There is a rhetoric of empowerment underlying the literature on conscientization, and it can be described as a forum in which the theological and methodological 'tools' of Christian witness are imparted to the masses (cf. Berryman 1984:26-32; Betto n.d.; Freire 1974).⁸ As conceptualized by the CEB members, conscientization marks a person's transformation from a member of the 'sleeping church' (iglesia durmida) to the ranks of 'conscientized christians' (crisianos conscientizados). It is as a function of this transformation that images such as the one described above yield their full meaning to Christians who, in the process of such a 'reading', fully realize their identity.

Illustrating the distinction between the two kinds of Christians, Carlos Ortega, a senior CEB member responds to my confusion over the status of neophytes (cursillistas) in the community:

No. They were Christians who went to Mass and nothing more. But they were not within the comunidad because they had to have a new cursillo in order to belong to the comunidad -- to the comunidad cristiana.

The transformation brought about by conscientization makes possible the neophytes' participation in the 'more concrete' discourse said to mark CEB worship. "Now they could understand us. Because they had already passed through the cursillos it was now possible to talk like this".

CEB members used the verb actualizar (to make present; actualize) when discussing conscientization. The term refers to a linkage between 'past' and 'present', between biblical chronicle and contemporary conflict. In this sense actualizar suggests a bringing together of elements that the un-conscientized, 'sleeping' Christian

might leave apart. It entails an apparent transformation of perception.

In taking up Freire's approach to education as critical praxis, Latin American pastoral workers have glossed it as a tri-partite model of "seeing/judging/acting". In these terms, actualizar also implies the agentive movement from perception to action. While this pedagogic schema of critical consciousness is far from CEB members' representation of their experience, the notion that a fully realized Christian identity results in action is not. Again the contrast between the CEBs and the iglesia durmida is invoked, here expressed in the form of a consigna religiosa (a call and response slogan) popular in 1984: "No basta rezar/ Tenemos que actuar" ("It is not enough to pray/ we have to act").

There is thus an added capacity that accrues to conscientized Christians, which results in the realization of a Christian identity that is otherwise only partially fulfilled. The biblical moment is made present through the reproduction of biblical meaning in contemporary action. This making present can occur through actions undertaken by community members, or through actions observed by them. Again, the latter is inescapable for a conscientized Christian, whose 'awakened' state makes possible such observation, which, in turn, compels future action.

Hence the power of the Via Crucis lies not so much in the participants' involvement in an iconic enactment of the Passion, but in its revelation/construction of them as witnesses to the Passion. Collapsing the distance between sacred text and current events, the Via Crucis participants are compelled to enact their Christian identity through historical action, which action carries newly revealed sacred potential. CEB members describe this as lucha (struggle) implicit in the acceptance or recognition of the "liberation in Christ". The struggle is a passage between a set of oppositions: sin/grace; lies/truth; darkness/light; slavery/liberty; death/life; old men (hombre viejo)/new man.

These oppositions are grounded in the master opposition of passivity/action (perhaps rezar/actuar), for it is through action that the CEB members undertake the salvific passage between these oppositions. A study guide used during Holy Week 1977 suggests an opposition between "many" who approached Holy Week simply as a "remembrance of an historical act", and "Christ and the true Christians" who "remember and ... should actualize Christ's testimony of love for all people" (italics added). This last category ("Christ and the true Christians") refers also to the bond formed between

Jesus and his disciples, formalized at the Last Supper. CEB members often claim a Christian experience close to this biblical bond.

The interpretive practices of the CEB members constitute a new mode of remembering, a transformed relationship with the biblical past which is seen as the locus of the paradigmatic 'actualization' of Christian meaning in history. Further, the (material) remembering of this past (through the same analytic techniques deployed to apprehend contemporary circumstances) is at the same time a conceptual re-ordering of the social present. Liberation Theologians refer to a process of the "incarnation" of the gospels in the CEB. "Incarnation", we should note, appears to be a two-way historical street; CEB members refer to Jesus' teachings as "conscientizacion" and speak of his fellowship with the apostles as the first "comunidad Cristiana". The temporal movement from the biblical past to the present, effected by actualization, is cross-cut by a spatial movement: a conceptual expansion of the individual to emphasize the solidarity of community, class, nation, and world. Here we must take note of two distinct but related conceptions of 'sin' expressed in the CEB. Community members speak of "sin" as an extra-individual condition inhering in specific social structures or institutions. This is what liberation theologians call "institutional structures of sin". Individual manifestations of sin, often termed "egoismo"⁹, at once contribute to these structures and are their precipitate.

This emphasis upon the structural relationship of part to whole draws clearly on the christian conception of 'church' as one body in Christ, and so structures Christian participation in Jesus' Passion as it continues today at a structural level. At the same time, this expansion of the (social) significance of individual experience establishes the semantic space for the multiple token level replications of the Passion to be assimilated to the historically located divine type. Resemblance becomes denotational.¹⁰ The part/whole relation is inverted to become 'the many in the one'. In both ways CEB members are made to enter the text: oriented with respect to contemporary instantiations of Christian narrative.

So, if the "actualization" is seen as the movement of meaning from past to present (better: the realization of sacred (potential) meaning in present praxis/action), it can also refer to this manifestation of supra-individual ties, as they themselves encode Christian significance. This dual spatial (social)/temporal (historical) aspect of actualization can also be expressed in the idiom of social reproduction, which captures the expansion of individual ties and the reproduction of meanings from the past into the future.¹¹ In the

following passage, a CEB member invokes both concepts -- actualization and communal sin -- consecutively:

Let's say ... that the theme I took up was "the comunidad". So, I would begin to talk about how the Lord called the Apostles together for the first comunidad -- the great Christian comunidad. And I was actualizing (this) in the world in which I lived. So we would say "How did the worker's organizations begin?" "How are they beginning to group together?" "How are the labour unions forming?" "How are the federations forming?" Well it begins with the family. One is single, later you marry, here come the children, and now come the grandchildren ... so the parents go about raising their children, they are actualizing. If the priest takes up¹² (the theme) "sin", he does not speak only of personal sin, but rather of communal sin (pecado comunitario). In other words, I commit a sin, it doesn't only remain in the person, but rather, it damages the entire community. So it is communal sin ... just as there has been sin at a national level where what I have done damages an entire nation.

III: VIA CRUCIS

Thus far I have attempted to sketch out an interpretive disposition self-consciously peculiar to the CEBs. Inasmuch as this disposition structures community members' readings of, and responses to, both Christian texts and the 'signs of their times', we may consider it as something of an emergent "exegetical habitus", generating meanings that appear to their believers to be quite undetermined by the socio-historical conjuncture of their conception (cf. Bourdieu 1977). In their apparent "unearthing" of the "buried possibility" of Christian meaning, CEB members realize history -- the medium of their witness and of God's action -- as nature (Ibid:79). The contemporary 'incarnation' of the gospel is predicated upon the 'immaculate perception' of the historical moment it chronicles.¹³ Bourdieu's notion is especially useful for an analysis that goes beyond the explicitly articulated 'tradition' of conscientization, beyond the posited primacy of an unmeditated remembering of the constitutive Christian events, to include additional modes of signification active in the practice of the Via Crucis.

If we accept the Catholic Church or, more broadly, "Latin American Catholicism", as a prime 'site' of the socialization so central to Bourdieu's notion of habitus, then the transformed Christian identity engendered through conscientization appears as a 'counter-habitus', replicating much of the symbolic field it consciously contests. Threshing what is reproduced from what is transformed, or, more importantly, evoking the interplay between them, is beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁴ At issue rather are inquiries into the changing possibilities of meaning within the symbolic system of Latin American Christianity as put into play by such rituals as the Via Crucis.

Following Hanks, it might be fruitful to consider CEB worship as an emergent discourse genre, "a set of principles immanent in practice" that, through its use or replication, is "part of the naturalization of [specific] social experience[s]" (1987:688-9). Certainly in my own encounter with the CEB members of San Pablo Apostle, five years after the Sandinista revolution and nearly two decades after their beginnings as a comunidad eclesial de base, their recountings of their history and assessments of the contemporary conflicts confronting their revolution were punctuated with references to conscientization, 'actualized' Christian meaning, and biblical narrative. These interpretive dispositions are at once the catalysts for making history, and the schemata that make sense of the historical realities they are held to have precipitated. Central to the present discussion is the naturalization of the transhistorical discourse of actualization, with all of the insights it carries into the conflation of contemporary experience with biblical chronicle.

In this second section of the paper, I turn to an analysis of the texts and images of the Via Crucis, which I propose to review here in an abbreviated form. I should stress first that the structure of the ritual text (lectura/comentario/oracion) replicates the tri-partite model of Freirian pedagogy (seeing/judging/acting), as well as the routine of weekly CEB Bible meetings (reunions).¹⁵ So the form of the text of each station is itself significant, as it embodies a distinctly 'CEB style' of relation to biblical text and worship. Similarly, the relative diminution of priestly authority, with a different lay Christian 'leading' the ritual at each station, enacts an aspect of their worship that community members point to as emblematic of the CEBs.

Secondly, each station is marked with at least four "labels" which place it within specific fields of meaning, grounding the station within the narrative sequence of Passion, additional references to the Christian tradition, and scenes referring explicitly to

contemporary Nicaraguan experience ... The title of the station, the image accompanying it, the quotation below the title, and the lectura, individually and through their juxtaposition, create frames of interpretation. These conceptual/actional wholes (after Fillmore's "frame semantics" 1985, 1978; cf. Hanks 1989) condition the interaction of text and interpreter, generating contextual meanings external to any individual code (linguistic, iconographic, theological, etc.) as such. The "shared meanings" "released" by these ritual symbols (cf. Munn 1971:592-3) are conditioned by their juxtaposition and by the interpretive disposition of the ritual participants as discussed above. The remainder of the text explicitly draws from these juxtapositions, but perhaps more importantly serves in the course of the ritual structure the CEB members' participation in the central juxtaposition evoked by the Via Crucis: that of their historical experiences with the sacred 'historical' narrative of Jesus' Passion. The structure of the text thus compels an exploration of and response to the meanings of the Via Crucis: a ritualized reading of the ritual text.

My point here is first to note that the graphic illustration accompanying each station of the Via Crucis 'means' differently in the presence of a caption that explicitly defines it as the 'nth' event in a familiar Christian narrative. But more importantly, the interpretive clues offered in the structure of the ritual establish spaces for meaning that exceed, as it were, the sum of the interpretive traditions thus juxtaposed. Further, the illustrations found in the Via Crucis Nicaraguense, like the images recalled by the title of each station, and the multiple permutations of word and image thus evoked by the text, are themselves each "a confluence of pictorial and verbal traditions" (Mitchell, 1986:42). Their 'reading' calls upon experiences far beyond a personal history within the Roman Catholic tradition, and often at variance with the apparent theological-political 'intent' of the ritual.

For instance, many of the 'reading skills' elicited by texts such as the Via Crucis were honed in interaction with those fields of mass media held to be the sites of the reproduction/socialization of the dominant ideology in Latin America. I am thinking especially of the co-reading of images and narrative common to 'comic-books'. As "devices of ideological transmission", (see Serra 1986:50-53; and especially Dorfman and Mattelart 1984) comics and similar modes of representation take on an added importance in societies with relatively low per capita percentages of televisions and radios, and high illiteracy. Beyond the functional advantages of these modes of communication, we might ask in what ways the very format itself is

objectified and constituted as an explicitly 'popular' discursive form. To be sure, the Via Crucis at hand is far from a stereotypic example of comic-strip style graphics (although such are certainly common to the contemporary practice of Christian groups of the 'left' and 'right' in Latin America). Yet as a mode of presentation, the study guide may be read as a stylistically self-conscious 'popular' text and, as such, it is constituted in opposition to 'traditional' representations of the Via Crucis. By extension, a new relationship is constructed between ritual participant and ritual text. So the very juxtaposition embodied by the title page of each station may itself evoke yet another familiar symbolic form. The pattern of signs itself constitutes another sign, a determined synthetic reading conditioning the interaction between reader and text.

Discussing the reading of different symbol systems (as suggested by the work of Nelson Goodman), W.J.T. Mitchell distinguishes "dense" from "differentiated" symbolic systems. The latter is dependent upon a finite number of distinctions, with tokens assimilable to fixed types across all contexts, and with gaps between distinguished characters "empty" (1986:67-8). The dense system is compared to an ungraduated thermometer. It is the limiting point of "fuzzy" semantic categories, in which every difference makes a difference (ibid:69): "A picture", Mitchell suggests,

is normally 'read' in something like the way we read an ungraduated thermometer. Every mark, every modification, every curve or swelling of a line, every modification of texture or color is loaded with semantic potential (ibid:67).

But such a reading of an image is not a reflex of the essence of the medium, or of the relevant human cognitive channels. "The differences between sign-types are matters of use, habit and convention" (Ibid:69). The following reading of the Via Crucis is intended to explore the ways in which a transformed religious 'convention', or 'habit/us' realized a 'denser' reading of a traditional religious symbol system at the historical moment of its performance. As part of this larger goal of trying to evoke the ways in which the Via Crucis expressed new meanings for and to the ritual participants, my aim will be to apply an understanding of CEB interpretive strategies to the end of understanding their encounter with the ritual text. Specifically, and as a suggestion of the possibilities for a fuller analysis, I will consider three modes of signification mediating the CEB members' 'historical remembering' of

a sacred event. Next I will turn to the remembered experiences of the CEB members to contextualize a specific set of images encountered in the Via Crucis.

1) JESUS OF HISTORY, CHRIST OF FAITH: THE THEOLOGY OF ACTUALIZATION

The first station, "Jesus Condemned to Death", bears the image of a (young?) man climbing onto the tail-gate of a pick-up truck (Fig. 3). He is being arrested by two National Guardsmen who stand behind him, armed and in uniform. One of the Guardsmen is about to strike 'Jesus' with the butt of his rifle. The passage below the illustration is taken from Isaiah 53: "He was detained and tried unjustly without anyone who would care for him". What follows is my translation of the entirety of the accompanying text:

Reading

"I have found in him no crime deserving of death, I will therefore chastise him and release him". But the people insisted with loud cries, asking that he should be crucified and the clamour grew. So Pilate pronounced the sentence that they demanded" (Luke 23:23-4).

Commentary:

Jesus of Nazareth, a carpenter, who has dedicated himself to announcing the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice, of love and liberty, is condemned to death by Pilate (representative of Roman power). He is accused of wanting to become King and of agitating the populace. Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent, but feels that he risks losing his post if the tale-bearers and functionaries go before the leader of the Roman Empire saying that Governor Pilate does not punish someone who wants to be King, who wants to take power. He runs the risk of looking bad, of being considered to be against the government.

There are many today as fearful as Pilate, they continue to condemn Christ. They condemn him by ignoring the suffering of the malnourished child who is slowly assassinated by a system which denies him food; they condemn him by not helping to solve the problem of unemployment or of miserable wages which continues slowly killing the worker and the peasant; they condemn him by allowing any form of injustice. Christ today is still an innocent victim.

Prayer: We ask forgiveness for having permitted the death, slow or rapid, of so many innocent and for not having dedicated ourselves, like Christ, to the struggle for liberation and justice.

All: Forgive [us] Lord, forgive [us].

The first point to be made concerns the use of tense markers in the text, and posits a certain theological significance in the patterned use of the signifiers "Jesus" and "Christ". To begin, note that the movement from biblical narrative (lectura/reading) to commentary on biblical narrative is accompanied by a shift from past to present tense. In the text of the first station compare the biblical excerpts "He was detained and tried unjustly", or "Pilate pronounced the sentence they demanded", with the commentary that begins: "Jesus of Nazareth, a carpenter, who has dedicated (se dedicaba) himself to announcing the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice, of love and liberty, is condemned to death by Pilate (representative of Roman power)". This shift occurs in eight of the fifteen stations, and more significantly, in seven of the first ten stations leading up to the physical crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection of Jesus. It may be seen as deictically grounding the ritual consideration of Christian narrative in the co-temporality so significant to the CEB conception of 'actualization'.

But if the word of the Gospel past is thus made flesh in its ritual enactment on the streets of contemporary Managua, the flesh of the CEBs historicizing biblical scholarship ("Did he need to eat?") is paradoxically made word in the practice of actualization. Which is to say that collapsing the temporal distance between events is not the full promise of actualization. The Commentary spans the realization (remembering?) of the biblical moment and the actualization of biblical meaning, as signified in the movement from "Jesus" who is emplotted in biblical history at the beginning of the Commentary, to "Christ" who becomes the transcendent referent after the transition marked by the new paragraph beginning "There are many today as fearful as Pilate. They continue to condemn Christ".

I am playing here on a theological distinction between "Jesus of History" and "Christ of Faith", which might be glossed for our purposes as 'history' and 'metaphor' or perhaps 'sacred historical token'/'transcendent divine type'. McBrien (1981) suggests that this distinction arises between the "historical fact" of Jesus' life, and the reaction to that life on the part of Jesus' contemporaries and subsequent generations. Inasmuch as the latter have "estimated

his significance in a particular fashion" (i.e. as "Christ"), Jesus "bears a meaning which transcends the historical fact of his existence. Jesus ... is a matter of historical record; Christ is a matter of meaning or interpretation" (1981:374). Although all of the commentaries in the Via Crucis text can be seen as moving from a summary remembering of the biblical event 'at hand' to a reflection on contemporary experience (as in: "There are many today ..."), this separation of history and metaphor, chronicle and interpretation, as encoded in the signifiers "Jesus" and "Christ", becomes increasingly blurred. In fact, it is inverted in the course of the ritual, and the relationship between them is transformed.

In later stations it is "Christ" inscribed within biblical chronicle while "Jesus" is encountered in contemporary experience. Here, the type "Christ" can be seen to stand to "Jesus" as realization stands to potential. The movement from "Jesus" to "Christ" in the narration of the biblical chronicle describes the founding template of Christian identity; the signifier "Christ" thus invoked suggests a completion or fulfillment of the meanings present. Conversely, in the movement from "Christ" to "Jesus", "Jesus" now found in contemporary commentary stands as yet unrealized sacred potentiality. The play is one of narrative time within a 'plot' whose end everyone knows and believes in. "Christ" now stands as the completion of the plot in (past) history, "Jesus" marks the uncompleted replication of the plot in (present) history. The denotational lode of the token is transformed: it now reveals some but not all of the meaning of the type. My claim is that this inversion/realization occurs through the active response of those who are witness to Jesus' Passion -- especially women. These witnesses are at once present and represented in the ritual performance.

Returning to the text, through the second station "Jesus Burdened with the Cross" (Fig. 4) and the third station "Jesus Falls for the First Time", (Fig. 5) the movement from "historical Jesus" to "transcendent Christ" as sketched above remains intact.¹⁶ In the fourth station, the image again is of a young man being seized by two Guardsmen (Fig. 6). Reaching to touch her son is Jesus' mother, and running toward this encounter from behind one of the Guardsmen is another woman. In the Commentary repeated below, the movement is one from the historical Mary-Jesus relationship to a transcendent mother-son relationship. ('Transcendent' because of its historically particular resonance with the experiences of women in the CEB). Jesus' meaning is actualized within contemporary chronicle through the particularized relationship of specific

witnesses to the Passion (i.e. mothers) to specific participants (their sons), cast here as sharing in the token-level replication of Jesus' ordeal:

Fourth Station: Jesus Encounters His Mother

"... and a sword will pierce through your own soul, but in this men will clearly show what they feel in their hearts" (Luke 1[2]:34-7).

Reading

Simon congratulated them and then said to Mary his mother: "Behold, this child must be the cause of the fall as well as the resurrection of the people of Israel, He will be made a sign which many will reject, ad as for yourself, a sword will pass through your soul" (Luke 2:34).

Commentary:

Mary is the strong woman of the Gospel, she has to endure many painful experiences by Jesus' side, but none as terrible as that at Calvary. In spite of the pain, Mary always stood by her son; she knew that he did the will of his Father and she did not oppose him. Like Mary, many mothers today know that their sons/children (hijos) have a mission to fulfill, and they [mothers] are always there sharing in the life of struggle and suffering. Their heart is always with the son who is arrested, lost, or suffering. Like Mary, many have witnessed the greatest suffering of all: the assassination of the child of their womb. Would that all mothers like Mary could understand that their children are fulfilling the will of the Father.

Prayer:

Perdon Lord, for not have accompanied the sorrowful mothers, for not having helped them to alleviate the suffering of their children, for not having helped them to prevent it.

All:

Forgive [us] Lord, forgive [us].

The fifth station (Fig. 7) entitled "The Cyrenean Helps to Carry the Cross" is illustrated with an image of a classroom (literacy campaign, conscientization?). Written on the blackboard is: "All men have the right to life". [Note that the text within the text speaks at once to an audience of cursillistas within the imaged classroom, and to an audience of ritual participants who themselves had once been cursillistas, and some of whom were Delegados de la

Palabra (Delegates of the Word), actively engaged in offering such courses in neighboring barrios]. Beneath the image is written: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians:6:2). In the Commentary, we again find "Jesus" and "Christ" invoked, but in a less distinct way. "Christ" is found in both interpretation and chronicle.

Reading: Then the soldiers took Jesus out to crucify him, leaving they encountered Simon de Cirene who was returning from the country, and they compelled him to carry Jesus' cross (Mark 15:21).

Commentary: The soldiers realized that Jesus was weak, that he had not the strength to bear the cross, thus they imposed upon Simon to help him. He helped the poor Christ, the worker Christ to carry the cross, this is the obligation of all Christians.

The people bear the heavy cross of poverty, of ignorance, of suffering, they can no longer bear this cross alone. The Christian commitment obliges us to help to bear this cross. Each time that we help in the process of conscientization, each time that we teach others of the great value of their lives and that we allow them to become agents of their own transformation, each time that we seek like others who reclaim their rights, we are being Cirineos, we are helping Christ to bear his heavy cross, we are lightening the burden of the Lord.

Prayer: Forgive me Lord, for not having conscientized my brothers for fear of becoming involved in problems and for the egoism which has prevented me from preaching the Gospel of justice.

All: Forgive [me] Lord, forgive [me].

The transformation I am mapping is made complete in the sixth station: "Veronica Washes the Face of Jesus" (Fig. 8). The reading and commentary follow:

Many were surprised upon seeing him, for his face was so disfigured that he no longer resembled a human being (Isaiah 52:11[14]).

Reading: (repeat)

Commentary: Filled with love for the suffering man, Veronica emerged from the multitude to wash the bloody face

of Christ. The suffering face of Jesus is encountered at every moment on our streets. We find him in the sick, in the tortured, in the woman who has been left alone and responsible for a family, in the child who has looked upon the annihilation of his parents. There are many of Christ who are disfigured, so that they no longer stand out. As Christians we have the duty to emerge from the multitude to wash him, to recognize him.

Prayer:

Forgive me Lord, for the many times that I have turned my face in order not to see you, in order not to commit myself to you.

All:

Forgive [me] Lord, forgive [me].

Four comments are appropriate. First, the temporal opposition "Jesus"/"Christ" noted in the first few stations is now inverted: "Christ" is found in the biblical chronicle, and "Jesus" is now present "at every moment on our streets". Second, "Christ" in each of these two stations (Five and six) is encountered in action: in an individual's emerging from the multitude. Third, the above two Commentaries are remarkable for their use of the past tense (which is found only in these and the stations detailing the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus). "Jesus" is made "Christ" within the temporal field of biblical chronicle. Finally, the prayer in station six is remarkable for its use of the singular pronoun "you" (familiar 'tu' form). Again, the only other stations in which this is found are stations twelve ("Jesus Dies on the Cross") and fifteen ("The Resurrection"). Similarly, while all of the other prayers implicitly or explicitly (stations five and six) and that of station fifteen explicitly suggest a collective ('we') voice, these prayers identify the speaker as an individual.

Pronomial and temporal deistic references coordinated with the transposition of the theological signifiers "Jesus" and "Christ" thus anchor and transform the Via Crucis participants' relationship to the biblical narrative, mapping the space between the ritual participants and the events their action commemorate. The realized transcendence of "Jesus" life, its sacred meaning, is situated in the historical moment of his struggle. Indeed it is realized in the response in history of those who are witness to his struggle. The biblical chronicle is thus reproducible through the actions in history of those in the multitude who are witness to "Jesus" Passion. Or rather, through the Via Crucis the chronicle is constituted as but partially present in the experiences of the participants, which

compels conscientized Christians to participate in its complete replication in contemporary practice.¹⁷

2) THE IDOLATRY OF THE DOLOROUS CHRIST

The second mode of signification considered here might be called the iconoclasm of the text, in that the interpretive concern to recover the materially determined, historical Jesus is manifest in an overturning of 'traditional' images of Jesus and a recontextualization of Jesus' meaning as Christ. Indeed, as a constitutive feature of the worship of cristianos conscientizados, in opposition to the iglesia durmida, 'actualization' appears to be profoundly iconoclastic.

The primacy of visual imagery in Latin American consciousness, its role in the constitution of the Spanish Catholic colonial order, and its persistence as a site of the contestation of that order down to the present, has been suggested in a number of recent studies (eg. Adorno 1986:80-120; Iletto 1979; Lopez-Baralt 1979, 1982; MacCormack 1984, 1988; Silverblatt 1988; Taussig 1981, 1984, 1988; Trexler 1984a, 1984b; Wachtel 1977). In a related discussion, Mitchell has commented upon the pervasive conceptualization of ideology in visual terms within Western social thought. "Insofar as ... ideas are understood as images -- as pictorial, graphic signs imprinted or projected on the medium of consciousness -- the ideology, the science of ideas, is really an iconology, a theory of imagery" (1986:164). Revolutions in the "science of ideas" are then conceptualized within the visual field by means of what Mitchell terms "the rhetoric of iconoclasm", a rhetoric in which the iconoclastic "science of ideas" is turned upon itself, yielding ideology as itself idolatry (Ibid: 164-8).

For Mitchell these remarks are preliminary to an examination of "the problematic of images" in Marx' writings on consciousness and ideology. Central to his commentary are the Marxian metaphors of the "camera obscura" and the "fetish" as found most clearly in Marx' discussions of ideology and the commodity-form respectively (Ibid:160-208). Mitchell underscores the 'no-win' nature of the rhetoric of iconoclasm which, taken to its logical conclusion "must interrogate its own premises, its own claims to authority", and so tax a Marxian tradition that has often embraced the promise of a "prophetic iconoclasm" (Ibid:206) which it presumes to disable "ideolatry" from the messianic/archimedean perspective of historical process.

For our purposes, these discussions offer clues for a reading of the integration of Marxian critique with Latin American theology,¹⁸ which can be seen as a dialogue between a self-conscious rhetoric of iconoclasm and the iconographic contours of Latin American religious thought. For a number of Latin American theologians, this integration has coincided with a reconceptualization (reinvention?/ re-reading?) of that continent's historico-theological tradition, and has, at the same time, precipitated an active effort to subvert that tradition via religious practice. Such an effort is reflected in a collection of essays contemporary to the Via Crucis Nicaraguense (1977), edited by the Argentinean theologian Jose Miguez Bonino, entitled Jesus: Ni vencido ni monarca celestial ("Jesus: Neither vanquished nor celestial monarch", published in English as Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies [1984]). In various ways, the essays undertake an analysis of the history of popular and institutional religious imagery in Latin America, particularly those representations falling under the category "christology", and so seek to sketch the iconographic contours of an "alienating piety", whose transformation into a "mobilizing one" is taken to be an "urgent and basic" task of any Latin American theology (Miguez Bonino 1984:4).

Notwithstanding the significant distinctions in the analyses, we can read the essays as focusing on an 'imperfect incarnation' of Jesus in Latin America. Drawing on contemporary and colonial Latin American religiosity, as well as pre-Colombian Spanish piety, the theologians attempt to evoke a "christology of oppression" "baptizing and confirming the establishment". For instance,

The historical Christ appears in only two of his aspects, and dramatically: as the helpless and harmless child, and as the humiliated and defeated victim. He was born, he died. But he never lived. The formative period stretching from his unproductive infancy to his option for a liberating messianic passion is forgotten. Full proof is to be had in the corollary of all this, our celebrations of Christmas and Holy Week [...]

At bottom, what does Holy Week mean for the masses? ... Is it perchance that, behind all this, there lurks the conscious or unconscious acceptance of one's situation of impotence and powerlessness, of being subjugated and oppressed, of inhumanity? ... What then has been the function of christology in Latin America? The first thing that stands out is its role in baptizing, sacralizing, the

conquista and the resulting oppression, as well as making a virtue out of suffering (Trinidad, 1984:51-59).

Such statements suggest the wider field of discourse contemporary to the production of the Via Crucis, and indicate an emergent conception of the tradition it sought to overturn: the idolatrous objects of its liberating iconoclasm.

At issue during the Holy Week ritual is the juxtaposition of representations of Jesus as a struggling "Christ", active and innocent, with traditional Latin American Christologies that tend to emphasize the 'dolorous Christ', passive and suffering on the cross, or the 'dead Christ' (in addition to Miguez Bonino, et. al.; see MacKay, 1933:93-4). The repetitive three 'falls' of Jesus (stations three, seven, nine) of the Passion narrative are seen here in counterpoint to images of strength, confrontation and, in the case of the Resurrection, worldly victory (stations four, five, six, eight, twelve, fourteen, fifteen). Moreover, in this "christology of resistance", even the 'fallen Jesus' is depicted in collective terms (see images of family, and wage labour/unemployment in stations 3 and 7 respectively), diffusing the notion of the suffering individual in ways reminiscent of the familial and class metaphors deployed to describe actualization and 'communal sin'.

With respect to station three we should also note that the 'nuclear family' may itself have been an ambivalent representation for the artist/theologian of our text. Social commentaries of pre-revolutionary Nicaraguan society refer to the family as itself replicating the patriarchal abuse of the Somoza dictatorship, and may reflect a critique of the ideological apparatus of Somocismo emerging at the time of these ritual events (Serra 1986:46-8, see also Gissi Bustos 1980:31-4; Dorman and Mattelart 1984[1971]:33-40). Such a reading stirs up new resonances for the opposition hombre viejo/hombre nuevo, and anticipates comments made below concerning the representation of young men in the Via Crucis imagery.

Similarly, in the text of the ninth station (Fig. 11), the third fallen "Christ" is an active participant in his destiny, raising himself for the completion of his Passion:

Ninth Station: The Third Fall of Jesus

"You will suffer much in this world, but be brave, I have conquered the world" (John 17:23 [16:33])

Reading (repeat)

Commentary: Christ's body has touched the ground for the third time. Being innocent, being all love, he had to fall to ground for a third time. History continues to be the same, innocent victims continue to fall in our country, the situation is desperate, those who daily fall victim to enemy powers are many; some fall for the final time, others succeed in raising themselves alone in order to continue the path of the cross which commits them, like Christ, to end with the crucifixion.

God grant that the Christians who succeed in raising themselves, succeed in making offerings of their lives to achieve the triumph of life and liberty.

Prayer: Forgive [us] Lord for permitting that the good, the innocent, those who only search for goodness, are the victims of the wave of evil that now plagues/attacks us.

All: Forgive [us] Lord, forgive [us].

I believe the image for this station depicts the Cathedral in Managua, which, until its destruction in the earthquake of 1972, was the site of repeated protests and occupations. Churches remained a symbolic site for CEB protest throughout the '70's, drawing increasingly violent responses from the National Guard (Berryman 1984:65-75; Galo 1983:115; Randall 1983:145-9). This escalation of violence ("the wave of evil that now plagues us"?) coincided with the declaration of martial law by Somoza in 1975. Lay church activists (Delegados de la palabra) were increasingly subject to the repression of patrolling Guardsmen.¹⁹

Of course the most striking juxtapositions evoked by the Via Crucis are those images that contain explicitly 'traditional' representations of the dolorous Christ. The Christs of stations one and two, for instance, may be seen as 'traditional' in their postures and in their depiction as apparently passive, suffering victims. In the first image, however, we find the icon displaced into the contemporary context of urban Managua. In the second image, the inverse occurs; the contemporary context is most literally inscribed within the Christian emblem of Jesus with the cross.

What appears to have been by far the most self-consciously 'traditional' Christ, the naked and passive Christ of the cross, is found in the eleventh station ("Jesus is Crucified") (Fig. 13). But here, this most pervasive and familiar icon of Latin American

Christianity is juxtaposed with two others: an outline map of Nicaragua (roughly an inverted triangle) -- suggestive perhaps of the international/geopolitical context of the 'crucifixion' denounced by the Via Crucis -- which serves as the cross to which Jesus is being nailed; and a foreign business man -- complete with suit and attache case -- positioned outside of the country, who is hammering the nails through Jesus' outstretched hands. It is against such a background -- world capitalism -- that the dolorous Christ of Nicaragua is aptly conceived. It is against this "hand that tortures" that "the many Christs crucified today" struggle "to create a more just society".

Eleventh Station Jesus is Crucified

"Woe to those who transform the laws into something as bitter as wormwood and throw justice to the ground! You hate the one who defends the just in the court and detest the one who speaks the truth" (Amos 5;10).

Reading: When they reached the place called Calvary they crucified him and two criminals, one on his right and one on his left" (Luke 23;33).

Commentary: For calling himself the Son of God, for proclaiming love and justice, Jesus Christ was crucified. The situation continues to be the same for his followers, those who proclaim justice, who struggle for a world where equality exists, who struggle for a just world, one filled with love; like Christ, they are also condemned to the cross and to suffering. The many Christs crucified today are only the image of the committed man, the image of the man who dedicates himself to create a more just society; more filled with love. As a Christian, you [sing.] ought to make this commitment with your pueblo, with your world.

Prayer: We ask the Lord's forgiveness for often having identified ourselves with the hand that tortures and not with Christ who liberates and saves.

All: Forgive [us] Lord, forgive [us].

Taken in the context of the preceding station ("Jesus is Stripped of his Clothes"), the juxtaposition of "Christ" and capitalism is more fully evoked. The message of this station is truly multivocal, resonant in some ways with the image of the beaten face of Jesus encountered in the sixth station which challenges participants to

recognize the humanity of those who are suffering. Although women figure prominently throughout the Via Crucis, this is the only image of the set that depicts a woman as the central referent of the narrative event. (Arguably Veronica of the sixth station so qualifies, but her actions have as their focus an implied "Jesus"- "Christ".) The illustration (Fig. 13) is of a woman with a small child being confronted by two Guardsmen. The implication is that she will be raped by them. The passage below the image is from Jeremiah: "They should be ashamed of their abominable deeds, but they have lost their shame". The commentary centers on the theme of human dignity. The reclaimed historicized humanity of "Jesus" is cast in opposition to the dehumanizing violence of the National Guard, as well as to the exploitative violence of economic relations:

Tenth Station: Jesus is Stripped of His Clothes

"They should be ashamed of their abominable deeds, but they have lost their shame" (Jeremiah 6:15).

Reading: (repeat)

Commentary: They stripped Jesus of his clothes, they leave him exposed to the ridicule of everyone, they raffle his clothes as if he had no sense of dignity. Christ continues to be stripped of his clothes, of his dignity. Those who are in a position to curb these violations do nothing, on the contrary they foment them.

The money that belongs to the people is badly used, the dignified body of the women is not only soiled but annihilated, the poor sell themselves like cheap goods and risk their luck among the powerful. As Christians it is our duty to struggle so that this dignity be respected, be taken into account.

Prayer: We ask forgiveness of the Lord for the time that we have allowed the violation of the rights of others.

All: Forgive [us] Lord, forgive [us].

3) ACTUALIZING THE ICONOCLASM

If such juxtapositions of traditional and contemporary images constitute a new field within which traditional characteristics of "Jesus" are revalued, this new reckoning of "Jesus" identity encodes a corresponding assertion of Christian identity, or more inclusively, of the social context within which Christian identity is made meaningful. What we know about "The God of the Poor" (El Dios de

los Pobres) thus constitutes our understanding of who the poor are. In this light, consider the ambivalent nature of the religious sign "Jesus" who in the Via Crucis is at once "innocent" and "criminal". The contradiction is resolved through the reconstruction of moral authority, privileging the action of the poor in history as the locus of such authority over and against the more traditional loci: the civil state, and even the institutional structure of the Catholic church.

There is in the course of the Via Crucis, an overturning not only of the 'guilt' of Jesus as reluctantly declared by Pilate, but of certain conceptions of Jesus' 'innocence' as well. For in replacing the "passive, dolorous Christ" with the "Jesus" of historical action, who "struggles" for a just world, who not only announces the Reign of God, but denounces the Reign of Evil, the ritual informs a moral perspective with transformative implications. Similarly, in setting the traditional icons of the Catholic faith alongside and in opposition to the authorizing symbols of state power (i.e. The National Guardsmen: the most ubiquitous emblem of Somocismo) the ritual constitutes a contesting field of authority, into which the ritual participants are drawn. In the twelfth station (Fig. 14) ("Jesus Dies on the Cross") the text embraces the 'criminal' identity of Jesus while at the same time asserting the 'guilt' of the system that his actions offend.

The image is of two young men confronting three armed Guardsmen. One of the young men is doubled-over, apparently shot. The passage below reads, "By the blood you have shed, you have been made guilty; you have defiled yourself with the idols you have made" (Exekiel 22:4). The text continues:

Reading: At about mid-day the sun was eclipsed and all the country was left in darkness until three in the afternoon. Jesus cried out loudly: "Father unto your hands I commit my spirit", and upon saying these words he died (Luke 23:44-46).

Commentary: There on Calvary was the body of the Lord, They had taken his life, the authorities thought they could justify this action. He was a dangerous man, a subversive. Calvary, the sacred mountain was witness to this crime. A rare coincidence but this holy place, the temple of Calvary, was also witness to other innocent young men, who like Christ, also were considered dangerous by the authorities. To search for goodness in a world where it seemed that evil

always triumphed, this is a great crime, a crime punished by death. As Christians we should prevent the triumph of evil, we should struggle for the triumph of goodness.

Prayer: Forgive [us] Lord for allowing you to continue being killed for searching for goodness, for allowing the deaths of so many innocent.

All: Forgive [us] Lord, forgive [us].

In the thirteenth station (Fig. 15), the theme of innocence is repeated. Although the violence done to his body marks him as "subversive" in the eyes of the State, the Commentary declares that "[Christ] continues being innocent". Note the inversion in this image as compared with that of station three, where a woman accompanied by her children looks over the body of her husband. Here a woman apparently tends to the body of her son. Two figures, male and female (husband?, daughter?) are just beyond the frame of the illustration which foregrounds this pervasive Christian dyad of mother and son. If, as I have suggested, there was an ambivalence to the representation of the nuclear family as in the third station, there is no such ambivalence here. The contrast extends to the texts:

Third Station: Jesus Falls for the First Time

"Seek Justice, give the oppressed their rights; make justice for the orphans and defend the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).

Reading: Nevertheless, they were our griefs that he bore, our sorrows that weighed on him, yet we thought him to be scourged by God, punished and humiliated (Isaiah 53:4).

Commentary: Jesus is weak, he can no longer support the weight of the cross and he falls to the ground. There are many men, women and children in our country who fall to the ground at one time or another weakened by misery, malnutrition or by powerlessness/ (impotence) before the powerful.

In our country there are many who like Christ fall to the floor because the weakness -- intellectual, economic or physical -- is so great [fuerte] that it no longer allows them to continue. The unjust system

leaves them without the vigour they need to continue their course.

God grant [Ojala] that we are able to commit ourselves to ending economic exploitation, the unjust distribution of goods and all that which weakens or which makes our people fall.

Like Christ, we should make ours the sorrows of the people [pueblo]; like him we should try to liberate it [el pueblo].

Prayer: Forgive [us] for having permitted such evil, so much misery, so much pain; forgive [us] for not wanting to make ours the sufferings of others.

All: Forgive [us] Lord, forgive [us].

Thirteenth Station Jesus is Taken Down From the Cross

"We should each give our life for our brothers" (John 3:16).

Reading: Joseph took down the body from the cross and wrapped it in a sheet he had bought (Mark 15:46).

Commentary: The body of Jesus was taken down from the cross and wrapped in a sheet. Mary, his disciples and friends, look upon this now lifeless body; this horribly beaten and tortured body. In our days this scene repeats itself with great frequency; mothers, brothers, friends, often have to look upon the lifeless body of a loved one. Often they have to look upon a disfigured body, a body deformed by blows, bullets, torture; but in spite of it all, the face of Christ is seen intact, he continues being innocent, a searcher for goodness, he who now lies lifeless. Our Christian duty charges us to put an end to this suffering, this pain, this death.

Prayer: Forgive [us] Lord for allowing so many bodies to be abused, disfigured, annihilated; Forgive [us] for not doing anything for the respect of human life.

All: Forgive [us] Lord, forgive [us].

The transformation is one from weakness and impotence to action ("a searcher for goodness"), from a Jesus who, as a victim, embodies the very structure of the Passion ("economic exploitation, the unjust distribution of goods"), to a Jesus who has fallen in an encounter of resistance to that structure. The Via Crucis aligns both of these "victims" under the common valence of "innocence" and in opposition

to the same "unjust system". What is more, while the earlier text stresses the multiplicity of those who "like Christ fall to the floor", the latter station underscores the living ("mothers, brothers, friends" [NB. no father]), who as witnesses, encounter "the face of Christ ... intact", and whose "Christian duty charges" them to act.

Not limited to its depiction of National Guardsmen as emblems of the "unjust system", such recasting of categories further informs the tension between the 'sleeping church' and the Christian identity realized in the CEBs, as in the following statement describing the integration of younger CEB members into the FSLN: "In the eyes of the youth, the bishops and the commandants of the revolution had changed places, the bishops were like powerful heads of state, and the commandants were a source of faith".

For many Nicaraguans in the CEBs in the late 1970's, the revaluing of such categories as "innocence", "guilt", "criminal" is inseparable from their own integration in increasingly "subversive" activities. The significance of the politico-moral valences ascribed to Jesus must thus be viewed with respect to this process of "questioning" in which the CEB members were then engaged. CEB members today point to the year 1976 as the beginning of the "segunda etapa" (second step): their move from non-violent forms of protest to active support and participation in armed struggle. Norma Galo (cf. note 19), described this 'second step' to me as follows:

At that time the Sandinista Front suggested that the only alternative for the overthrow of the dictator was the path of armed struggle. So we, as Christians, at the time it scared us. We were scared because we had always been taught that the Christians had to ask God, that one day we are going to have that which this world did not give us. But by that time we had gone through a very clear period of religious conscientization, and we had begun to see that God made man, incarnated him in the reality of the pueblo, and that we had to reclaim the fact today that we were truly incarnated in all the things the pueblo was living through; that this is perfectly clear. We had taken the first steps, we had taken one of the first steps, which was to occupy the churches and close them and say "O.K., today you're not going to see a Mass because you can't have communion while our children are being assassinated. God does not want this. God cannot be with this" So, that's to say, we thought that in the name of God we had to get involved in a lot of situations, and that, it was the time to make God present in the struggle for justice ... but

exploitation didn't make God present, neither did our remaining tranquil in our houses.

The juxtapositions evoked by the Via Crucis offered a moral map for righteous action, ordering the insertion of Christian identity/action into the field of contemporary Nicaraguan life.

IV: FROM BIBLICAL NARRATIVE TO ORAL HISTORY

I would like to return to a more detailed look at at least one of the mediating cultural categories at work in this ritualized historical narrative: the images of women in the Via Crucis and especially the relationship between mother and son. My effort will be to contextualize the mobilization of these images within what I have been told by the CEB members about the history of their community.

The CEBs of San Pablo Apostle were initiated in 1966 by a Spanish priest inspired by an experimental ecclesiastic community called "The Family of God" in San Miguelito, Panama. The community was intended for married couples, and when both spouses attended, one member remarked, "there was a strong and tranquil marriage". The new community of San Pablo Apostle focused on domestic and neighborhood concerns in what was then a parish of some 60,000 people living in four colonias. Many of the parishioners were campesinos displaced from the countryside in the early 1960's.²⁰ People with whom I spoke, nearly two decades later, recalled drug use by their children as a major concern, as well as alcoholism, prostitution, and gambling which flourished under the protection of the corrupt National Guard. Indeed, almost all of the oral histories I collected recounted participation in the CEB as an active response to this chaotic and sinful state, a response motivated by concern for their children.²¹

The "Family of God" notwithstanding, another recurrent theme in the oral histories of women from the CEB, is the dissolution of marriage ties with their increasingly radicalized participation in the CEB. This was particularly the case after the adoption of the curseillos de conscientizacion in 1969. In the oral histories, this attenuation of husband-wife ties was correlated with an emphasis of mother-son/daughter ties, and this at a time when a number of young men and women from the barrio had become involved in armed resistance against the National Guard in Managua. Moreover, and as noted above, this (the mid-1970's) was a period of martial

law, a time when all young men were increasingly subject to the arbitrary repression of patrolling Guardsmen (Berryman 1984:70; Keen and Wasserman 1984:448-9). "It was illegal to be young", CEB members told me.

Discussing her relationship with her former husband ("with the triumph of the revolution, we were separated") and her sons, Julieta Ortega (no relation to Carlos) told me:

All of my sons are guerrilleros. Two are in the military, but two participated in the revolution. I first organized myself with them when the organization AMPRONAC²² still existed. We would go to the reuniones Cristianas, the priests were making ... they were conscientizing us, and then I began to involve myself in AMPRONAC. So my husband would tell me, 'you're nothing but a busy bee' ... So I told him, 'Since my sons are involved in the revolution, I have to walk with Christianity and also in the revolutionary process (el proceso); because my sons are there, I have to follow my sons'.

Speaking to a later interviewer, Julieta sums up our point precisely: "You can find a husband anywhere, but not a son ... I left my husband in the house reading a cowboy novel and went into the streets" (Peterson, n.d.).

At the risk of a crude gloss of stereotypic conceptions of Latin American machismo, Julieta's testimony suggests a transformation of the cultural constitution of Latin American gender space. I refer here to the 'household -- church' (body-- soul?) axis of matrifocal symbolic space, as opposed to the male-centred space of the 'street', with its corresponding economic and political activity (Ferro 1981; Ingham 1986:40-77; Nash and Safa et.al. 1980). Significantly, the 'street' in Nicaragua, was also the space of the National Guard, a space physically contested by the performance of the Via Crucis, as well as by Julieta when she left her husband "in the house" with his cowboy novel "and went into the streets" to join her son.

It was precisely in the context of these domains of traditional political passivity (i.e. Church and Home), that women from the CEB realized their most radical political action. This emergence within the CEBs entailed a transformation not only of local conceptions of 'church,' but a reciprocally determining transformation of conceptions of 'the political' as well. Julieta's story is neither unique to her, nor to women involved in the CEB. For these women, however, their participation in the Via Crucis in the years

1975-9 was inseparable from their stories which foregrounded and enriched unique meanings encountered in the stations of Jesus' passion. Going into the streets, then, is seen as an assertion of motherhood, understanding "like Mary", as the Via Crucis implores, "that their children are fulfilling the will of the Father", and there is a rich tradition within the CEB of mother-son 'war stories'.

There is a pattern of concealment in many of these stories, effecting the alliance of mother and son. The 'subversive' activities of the muchachos ('youngsters':the term used throughout Nicaragua to refer to the revolutionary combatants) were screened from the view of the street by the day-to-day domestic activities of women in Managua (a trip to the pharmacy, washing clothes); or by the physical partition of domestic from public space (hiding weapons within the houses; networks of passages from one house to the next, circumventing the street):

- 1) Women were often instrumental in supplying the muchachos with one of the few weapons they had: homemade 'contact bombs'. Different women would go to the pharmacy, each purchasing a different chemical used in making the bombs, which were later manufactured for use by the combatants.
- 2) Women also played a role in concealing other weapons: rifles taken in ambushes of the National Guard. The guns were hidden in houses within the community, so more often than not they were left in the care of the women. Access to these weapons was facilitated by a network of passages connecting the spaces behind some of the houses.
- 3) The woman with whose family I lived told me of washing her son's dirty clothes early in the morning, so that neither the National Guardsmen nor his father could tell that he had attended clandestine training sessions given by the FSLN.
- 4) Women from the CEB would also participate in ambushes on Guardsmen. The muchachos would shoot out street lights with their sling-shots²³, and when the Guard would drive up the street to investigate, women would begin yelling and clapping to surprise the Guard while the muchachos would begin to attack.
- 5) Strongly resonant with the representations of Mary and Veronica, and especially the image of station thirteen as discussed above, was the CEB members' care for combatants who were injured or killed. Many participated in a clandestine infirmary organized by the community, and some tell of burying the bodies of fallen combatants.

- 6) Finally, a CEB member gives the following account of her participation in the insurrections:

We participated in the war. All of the comunidades did. One person would cook. I, for instance, would cook the beans here ... over there someone would be cooking rice, then they [the muchachos] would pass to another person who cooked plantains, another would cook meat ... others, perhaps were involved in other work: hiding the muchachos when the Guard came -- whatever needed to be done I experienced a manifestation of God here in my house. This sack of beans lasted for more than three months. The triumph came and I still had beans. How did these beans multiply like that? Because with all my relatives, we were a big family. We were fifteen then and we all ate, and I cooked for whoever would come by to take some beans with him.

This is not to suggest an inviolable sexual and generational division of revolutionary labour in Nicaragua. Women -- older and younger -- took up arms in the course of fighting against Somoza's National Guard, and many, no doubt, were moved to such action without ever participating in a CEB. Similarly, there are men active in the CEB today who played a role in the support network sustained in the barrio: staffing the 'hospital', if not cooking the beans.

Nonetheless, the people enacting the Via Crucis were a culturally constituted community, not only in the conditioning (structural?) forces bringing them together, but also in their emerging conception of themselves. And this conception was embedded in the historical moment of their perception. The point then, is that, in the moment of its enactment, the Via Crucis gives form to specific experiences of CEB members. The linearity of the Passion narrative is interrupted by categories and images which thus break free of the constraints of historical plot, or 'traditional' meanings; new voices are revealed, a 'denser' reading realized: motherhood becomes a salient component of revolutionary action, invested with sacred potential.

CONCLUSION

I have tried here to consider the Via Crucis as a ritual enactment of biblical narrative that is itself historical practice, and

as a vehicle for the remembering of a posited sacred history which, by its remembrance, is reproduced within the temporal field of the ritual actors. These actors are thus compelled to future action in history. I have suggested that the CEB members' encounter with the biblical/ritual text is informed by an emerging interpretive tradition taken up at the very core of the Christian identity realized in the CEBs. At the same time, the remembering of Biblical 'history' is mediated by the historical experiences of CEB participants, which experiences, in turn, are infused with structures and meanings illuminated by this dialectical encounter with sacred narrative. This interplay of meanings received from history and meanings revalued in history suggests that rituals such as the Via Crucis embrace and condense a confluence of meanings and traditions much broader and more diffuse than is indicated by the CEB members' explicitly declared exegesis. The transformative "Christian praxis" undertaken by the CEB members as they fused their action in history with sacred meanings recovered through history emerged at the cusp of a narrativized tradition rooted in church practice, and a developing "folk-marxism" informing CEB exegesis. Over and against CEB members' claim to an unmediated historical analysis of the biblical moment as recovered in the performance of the Via Crucis, I have attempted to counterpose additional cultural resonances, yielding additional modes of signification activated and articulated in this ritual of resistance.



Figure 1 of 17

LECTURA:

"Simeón los felicitó y después dijo a María su madre: Mira, este niño debe ser causa tanto de caída como de resurrección para la gente de Israel. Será puesto como una señal que muchos rechazarán, y a ti misma una espada te atravesará el alma".

Lucas 2:34

COMENTARIO:

María es la mujer fuerte del evangelio, tiene que vivir muchas experiencias duras al lado de Jesús, pero ninguna fué tan terrible como la del Calvario. A pesar del dolor, María siempre estuvo al lado de su hijo; sabía que él hacía la voluntad de su Padre y ella no se opuso.

Como María, muchas madres hoy día saben que sus hijos tienen una misión que cumplir, y ellas siempre están allí compartiendo su vida de lucha y sufrimiento. Su corazón siempre está al lado del hijo preso, del hijo perdido, del hijo sufriendo. Como María muchas han presenciado el sufrimiento más grande: el asesinato del hijo de sus entrañas.

Que como María todas las madres puedan comprender que sus hijos están para cumplir con la voluntad del Padre.

ORACIÓN:

Perdón Señor por no haber acompañado a las madres dolientes, por no haberles ayudado a mitigar el sufrimiento de sus hijos, por no haberles ayudado a evitarlo.

ORACIONES:

Perdón Señor, perdón.

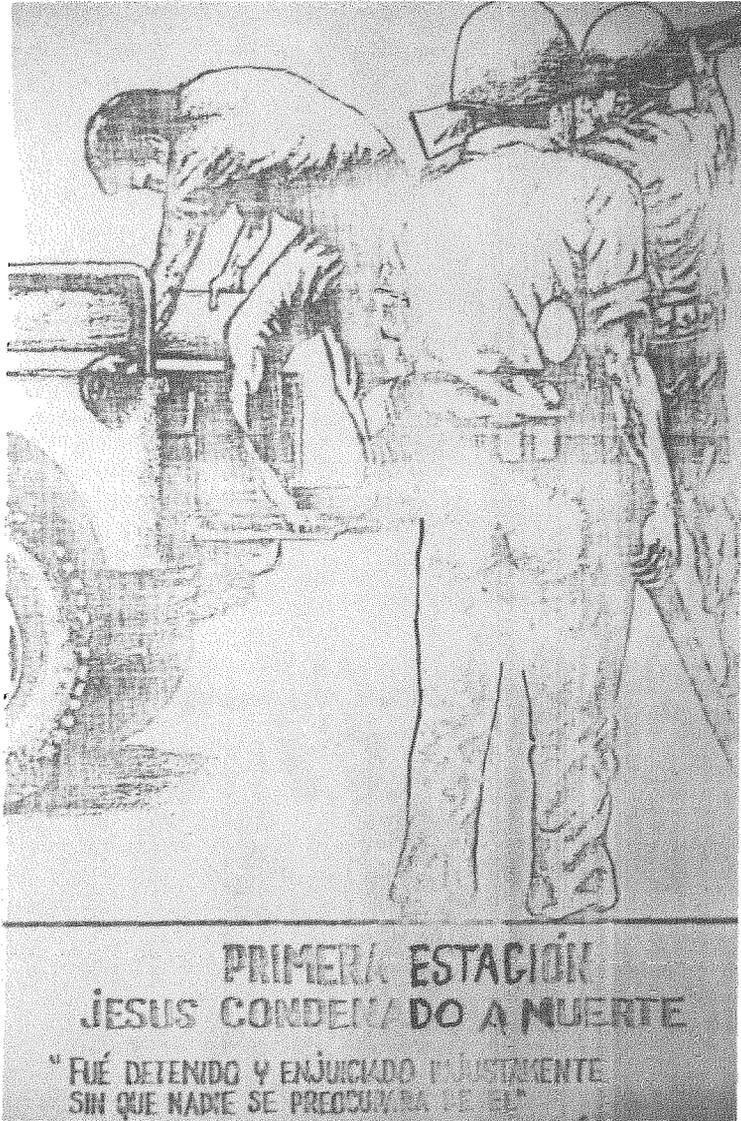


Figure 3 of 17

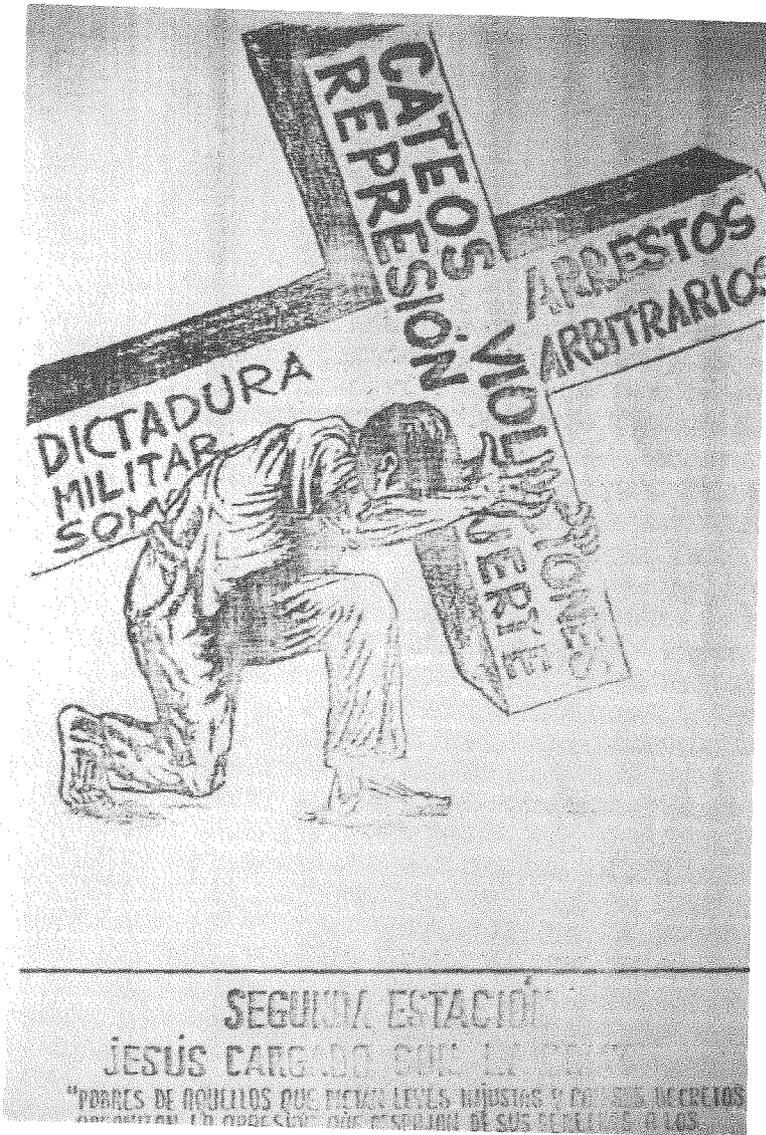


Figure 4 of 17



Figure 5 of 17

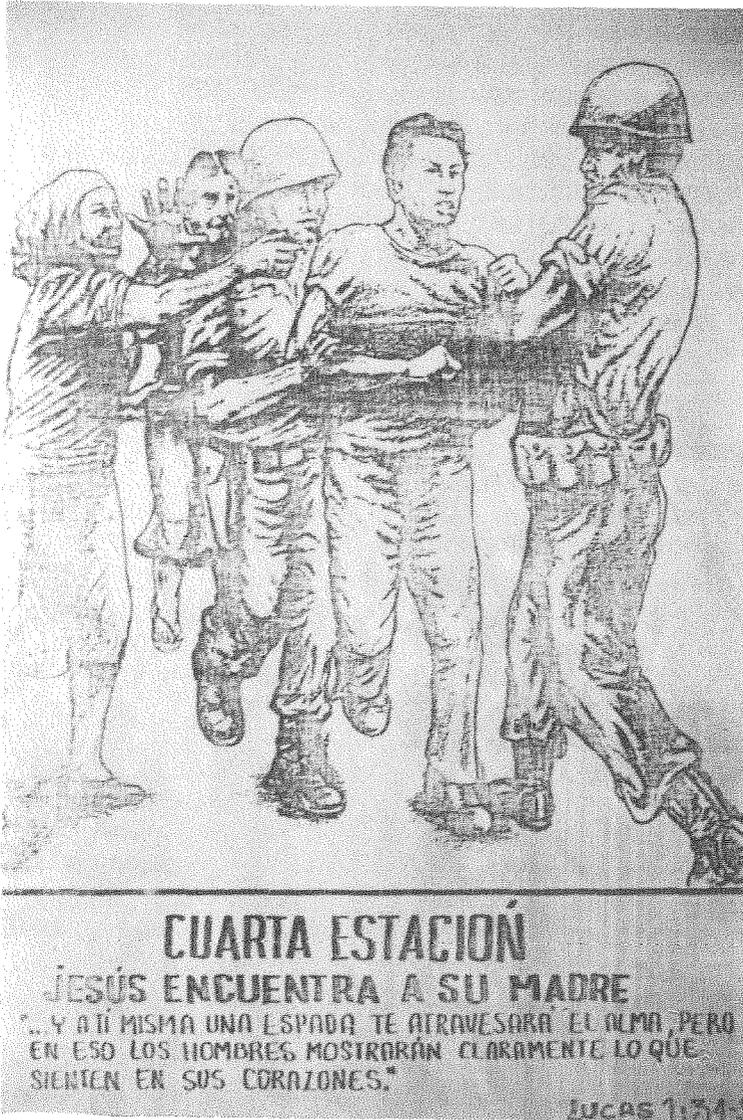


Figure 6 of 17



Figure 7 of 17



SEXTA ESTACIÓN

LA VERÓNICA LLEVA EL ROSTRO DE JESÚS
MUCHOS QUEDARON ESPANTADOS AL VERLO, PUES SU CARA
ESTABA DESFIGURADA QUE YA NO PARECÍA SER HUMANO.

Figure 8 of 17



Figure 9 of 17



Figure 10 of 17



Figure 11 of 17



Figure 12 of 17



Figure 13 of 17



Figure 14 of 17



Figure 15 of 17



Figure 16 of 17



Figure 17 of 17

NOTES

This essay is based upon a brief period of research conducted in 1984, which was supported by the Department of Anthropology and the Davenport Committee of Wesleyan University. My thinking about these issues had its start in conversations with Elizabeth Traube and Eugene Klaaren. The specific contours of this paper took shape in conversations and classes with Jean Comoroff and Nancy Munn, and this version has benefited from critical readings by them, by Mark Rogers, and by the editors of this volume of NEXUS.

Thanks, of course, must go to the people of San Pablo Apostle, who so willingly shared with me their histories and their hopes. The critical reading I attempt to give to their exegesis in no way diminishes the respect I have for their faith and their courage. Rather, this cultural consideration of their religious praxis is a celebration of their commitment to transforming a world in which they cannot live.

1. This parish is comprised of five colonias or 'neighborhoods' each of which now has a distinct CEB, although they are conceived as sharing a common history. My research was primarily with one of the CEBs, that of Colonia Nicarao.
2. In the recollections of the CEB members, the FSLN offered a logical extension of the Christian commitment (compromiso cristiano) already being realized in the context of the CEB.
3. The 'guide' was printed by an organization called 'Comunidades Cristianas por la Paz', and was most likely produced in Managua for the use of a number of CEBs. Stark (1981:349-63) reproduces some of the images found in this 'guide' indicating their circulation within the hispanic community of Chicago in 1979.
4. I refer here to a series of printed "Charlas" (literally, "chats"): brief readings and outlines for discussions to be held on each day of Holy Week, leading up to Friday when the Via Crucis was performed. These discussions would review the events to be commemorated in the ritual proper. So, the charla for Monday is entitled "Explication of Thursday", that of Tuesday, "Explication of Friday", etc.

5. For examples of other "contemporary christologies" that explicitly figure themselves with respect to a post-Enlightenment theological embrace of the science of history, see Schillebeeckx, 1979; Ogden, 1983; Hellwig, 1983.
6. My point here and in what follows is to underscore this conjuncture of historical traditions. The literature on the relationship between "Marxism and religion" in the context of theologies of liberation in Latin America and elsewhere is burgeoning, and requires more than the passing consideration that it receives here. See Lancaster (1988) for a recent anthropological attempt at these issues in the Nicaraguan context, and Berryman (1987:139-159, 217-18) for an overview of the recent theological literature.
7. The Via Crucis was often closely monitored by the Nicaraguan National Guard. I was told that because of this it was not performed every year. Moreover, one CEB member told me that a Spanish priest who had worked with them on the Via Crucis was refused readmission to Nicaragua after a brief visit to Spain.
8. See Lancaster (1988:195-216) for a related discussion of CEBs, popular religion and class consciousness in post-revolutionary Nicaragua.
9. See, for instance, the text of station five below.
10. See Mitchell's (1986:54-63) discussion of iconicity, resemblance and representation.
11. It may not be coincidental that the first name of the CEB was the "Family of God" (see below).
12. Note the parallel constructions: "Let's say the theme I took up" ... , and "If the priest takes up "... The speaker is a Delegate of the Word (Delegado de la Palabra), essentially an "advanced" CEB member who may give the cursillos de conscientizaci3n to new members. These lay Christians assume many of the ritual functions of priests, whose diminished visibility is said to be a condition of the possibility for the emergence of the CEBs as an authorizing forum for the 'capillary exegesis' (following Foucault 1980:96) that is our

concern. Similarly, where CEBs have not been "successful", I have heard it said that this was because the catechists (analogues to the Delegados) were replicating the priestly hierarchy in their relations with their community. While these last comments represent 'native models' (here, theologians/pastoral workers) of the post-Vatican II Latin American church, they point out the significance of such base-level ecclesial form as sites of the interplay, intended and inevitable, between theology, institutional/missionary Catholicism, and 'popular' religion.

13. The pun and much of the analysis of the valuation and potential revaluation of signs in action in history are borrowed from Sahlins (1984:146; 1981).
14. See, for instance, Comaroff's approach to religious movements of resistance as "the product of a 'dialectic in a double sense': on the one hand, the structural interplay of sociocultural order and human practice; on the other, the historical articulation of systems dominant and subordinate" (1985:252).
15. Reuniones entail a lectura and an extended analysis, usually with many participants, of the passage read. Also part of the reunion is the análisis de la coyuntura (literally, "analysis of the conjuncture") in which local, national and world events are discussed and analyzed "in the light of the Bible".
16. Note here that the illustration of this first "Fall" depicts a woman and three children looking over the dead body of her husband. This image of a woman alone with children, and especially the relationship between mother and son is a multi-vocal one indeed, and one to which I shall return later in the analysis. The fourth station -- "Jesus encounters his mother" -- may be seen as a sharpening of this focus on mother-son relations, indeed as the completion of a rotation away from the axis of marriage ties, to the Christian dyad of mother-son.
17. I have already noted that the text for each of the stations places the CEB members as witnesses to the Passion rather than as enduring it themselves. It is their complicity as observers that the Commentaries consistently underscore, and it is through the option for historical action arising out of religious reflection that this distance is overcome.

18. Although this discussion will focus upon efforts to define and subvert an 'idolatrous' theological "tradition" within Latin American Catholicism, Mitchell's comments apply more broadly to many contemporary theologians who have taken up Marx's metaphor of the "fetish" as the entry point for a theological critique of the "idols of capitalism" (Assman 1985, as discussed in Berryman 1987:148-50).
19. Norma Galo, a member of the CEB of San Pablo Apostle, participated in an international conference of "Christian Women for Peace", in 1983 in Managua. There she said: "We participated in occupying the churches, from which we denounced the fact that thousands of young people and adults, living temples of God, were victims of tortures and massacres in Nicaraguan jails, and yet they continued to fall in the streets under the bullets of the genocidal guardia" (1983:115).
20. I am indebted to Anna Peterson, who has compiled an account of the history of the San Pablo CEB, for many of these details.
21. Lancaster (1988:62-66) reports identical patterns in the oral histories of the pseudonymous CEB 'Rigoberto' in Managua.
22. AMPRONAC: The Association of Women Concerned with the National Problems.
23. Judging from my own observations as well as the accounts I have heard or read, sling-shots are apparently 'standard-issue' for most Nicaraguan boys. This makes for a rich tradition of David and Goliath metaphors in accounts of the insurrection.

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