the MARYKNOLL CATHOLIC MISSION in PERU, 1943–1989

Transnational Faith and Transformation

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Like many people who attended Catholic schools in the United States, I was introduced to Maryknoll when a mission priest assigned to Africa gave a talk to my third-grade class. For earlier generations of parochial school students, these mission talks were a staple of the school year and sometimes a first step to joining Maryknoll, possibly the best-known Catholic mission organization in the United States. I was not a devout Catholic and had no interest in becoming a nun, so Maryknoll and Catholicism moved to the far reaches of my mind until college. A cursory introduction to liberation theology in the United States brought me directly to Maryknoll, whose Orbis Books published virtually all the available works on the subject in English. And preliminary study of the conflicts in Central America introduced me to the murdered Maryknoll sisters in El Salvador; to Maryknoll Father Miguel d’Escoto, foreign minister of the revolutionary Sandinista government in Nicaragua; and to Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois, founder of the School of the Americas Watch. Maryknoll missionaries were at the heart of liberation theology, progressive Catholicism, and revolution, which placed them in opposition to U.S. policy in Latin America.
Years later, in a graduate seminar on popular religion in Latin America, I began to think again about Maryknoll and liberation theology. I contacted Maryknoll with the hope of writing a research paper on nuns and their role in liberation theology and popular Catholicism and learned that Maryknoll maintained a well-organized archive. During a preliminary research trip, I stumbled upon the dramatic story of Maryknoll sisters in Guatemala. In 1968 a group of Maryknoll clergy led by Sister Marian Peter (Margarita Melville) was expelled from the country for spearheading a meeting between clergy and leaders of the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR), a leftist guerrilla organization seeking to overthrow the U.S.-supported military government. As surprising as seeing a nun in the vanguard of a revolutionary movement was the fact that Sister Marian Peter had not been engaged with the mission to Guatemala’s indigenous poor majority but with education for daughters of the elite in Guatemala City. Maryknoll founded Colegio Monte María in 1953, at the height of elected President Jacobo Árbenz’s agrarian reform program and less than a year before a U.S.-sponsored military coup overthrew him. At this time Maryknoll was fully enfranchised with the elite. The sisters shared lunch at the fincas of large landowners, received gifts from the director of the United Fruit Company, and socialized with the wife of the U.S. ambassador. The dramatic transformation from advocates of the status quo and allies of the United States to apparent instigators of revolution in just fifteen years called for investigation.

But on the face of it, the answer seemed obvious. The new Maryknoll mission in Guatemala was part of a greater transformation of the Latin American church initiated by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and the application of its conclusions to the conditions of their region by Latin American clergy and theologians. When the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) met in Medellin in 1968 to articulate their church’s response to the Second Vatican Council, they concluded that the greatest challenge confronting the region was not a crisis of faith but poverty. Most Latin Americans shared a profound Catholic faith but suffered a poverty so dehumanizing that it appeared an offense against God. CELAM called on the Latin American church to work to change the structural conditions that maintained the status quo. This emphasis on social justice, derived in part from...
the nascent ideas of Peruvian theologian and diocesan priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, marked a radical departure for the Latin American church, which was historically allied with the elite and the military. Shortly after the CELAM conference, Gutiérrez published *A Theology of Liberation*, a kind of bible for the progressive Catholic Church in Latin America and, largely through the efforts of Maryknoll, also in the United States.5

Within a decade critics in Latin America, the United States, and even the Vatican would condemn liberation theology and the preferential option for the poor for causing violent revolutions in Latin America.6 U.S. officials even named Maryknoll missionaries as instigators of conflict.7 But as I was beginning to see from my early research on Maryknoll in Guatemala, the situation was complicated. Sister Marian Peter and the small cohort of clergy expelled from Guatemala in 1968 had actually met with FAR in 1967, a year before the CELAM meeting in Medellín. The “roots of rebellion” seemed deeper than the hierarchy’s appeal for change.8 Research in other Latin American countries also suggested that neither CELAM nor liberation theology nor Maryknoll missionaries caused revolution. Instead, the contingent juncture of social, economic, religious, and political contexts determined the influence of these new theological currents.

In Peru, where Gustavo Gutiérrez developed *A Theology of Liberation* and where Cardinal Juan Landázuri Ricketts, copresident of the 1968 CELAM meeting, actively supported progressive Catholicism, the result was reform, not revolution.9 In 1968 General Juan Velasco Alvarado came to power in a military coup against the elected government of Fernando Belaúnde Terry. Velasco’s was among the first of a wave of military dictatorships that would sweep Central and South America in the 1970s.10 But the results were distinct. Whereas most dictatorships repressed popular movements and imposed draconian economic policies, Velasco instituted radical reforms of the type usually associated with violent revolution. He introduced an agrarian reform program that eliminated massive estates, or *haciendas*, responsible for maintaining a semifeudal land tenure system in southern Peru. He recognized *barriadas*, settlements formed by “invasions” of rural migrants to the outskirts of Peru’s urban centers, as legal and named them
“pueblos jóvenes” (young towns), suggesting an optimism about their future and that of the country. He simultaneously sought to vitiate indigenous identity by transforming the celebration of the Day of the Indian into the celebration of the Day of the Campesino and to valorize it by recognizing Quechua as an official language of Peru. And he nationalized the corporations of some of the most powerful foreign interests, including the U.S. International Petroleum Company (IPC).

An alliance with the progressive Catholic Church provided the backbone for Velasco’s reforms. Peru’s traditional powers—the church and the military—formed a mutually reinforcing alliance to institute radical top-down reforms that modernized the country and sought to enfranchise marginalized populations. Liberation theology justified and contributed to this alliance. Maryknoll missionaries became silent participants.

How was it possible that liberation theology, credited with or blamed for instigating revolution in one country, could promote reform in another, especially when structural conditions appeared similar? And how could the same missionaries become advocates of revolution in one country and silent participants in reform in another? Both Peru and Guatemala were characterized by extreme inequalities in the distribution of land; by socially, politically, and economically disenfranchised indigenous majority populations; by agricultural-export-based economies; and by dependence on the United States. The church and the military in both countries historically contributed to maintaining the status quo. So why had the church and the military allied in Peru to promote radical reform while segments of the church in Guatemala allied with popular organizations and became identified as the enemies of the military? And why in Peru did the alliance and reforms prove so short-lived? Within a decade, the Catholic Church negotiated a separation from the Peruvian state. The reforms designed to stave off revolution seemed instead to lay the groundwork for the Maoist-inspired Shining Path that opposed the Catholic Church and ultimately turned against the indigenous people whose interests it claimed to promote.

This study attempts to answer these questions by examining Maryknoll missionaries’ experience in Peru from 1943 to 1989. Maryknoll helped build the foundation for liberation theology in Peru and con-
tributed to disseminating ideas that contributed to progressive Catholicism and social transformation in the Americas. Maryknoll missionaries were among the first of a new wave of foreign clergy to settle in Peru during World War II. They consistently maintained a force of clergy whose numbers outstripped any other single mission organization. Not even the Jesuits could compete. Moreover, Maryknoll in the United States played a guiding role in the development of the U.S. mission to Latin America. Maryknoll Father John Considine was at the heart of the Catholic Church’s interest in the region.

Maryknoll missionaries arrived in Peru in 1943 hoping to establish a “Romanized” practice of faith emphasizing memorized knowledge of prayer, doctrine, and catechism and rigid participation in the sacramental life of the church. They believed that they would “save” the Peruvian church, which suffered a desperate scarcity of clergy, despite the overwhelming number of Catholics (98 percent) in that country. The missionaries, who departed for Latin America during an era when nationalism, economic resources, and anti-Communism dominated the American ethos, also believed that they could provide economic resources to alleviate the poverty that could make Peru’s people susceptible to the appeals of Communism and Protestantism.

Maryknoll priests and sisters introduced religious and economic changes in Peru, but they could not simply impose their ideas, their practices, or their resources. Instead, they were incorporated into a culture with a strongly established Catholic faith embedded in every aspect of life. Catholic celebrations punctuated individual lives; reinforced social, ethnic, and geographic hierarchies; and defined relations between the Peruvian church and state. The result of this engagement was a process—to a large extent unconscious—of negotiation, whereby Maryknoll missionaries and the people of Peru each sought to assert their own ideals and practices of faith. As the missionaries introduced spiritual and material innovations they contributed to change in Peru, but they also reinforced traditions related to the role Catholicism had played historically in the country. Mission was a reciprocal engagement through which both Maryknoll and Peruvians were transformed. No one controlled the results. Mission led to a range of unintended outcomes that had a dramatic influence in Peru and, through Maryknoll, in the United States.
Although Maryknoll played an especially important role in its mission to Peru, its missionaries were part of a much larger influx of foreign Catholic clergy that began during World War II, accelerated in the 1950s, and became a virtual flood in the 1960s. The Maryknoll mission endeavor, together with the broader influence of Catholic clergy and laity in Peru from the 1940s through the 1970s, transformed the country. Maryknoll missionaries, for their part, were influenced by changes in the United States, in the universal Catholic Church, and in Latin America. Their mission developed in direct response to these changes. Their experience provides broader insight into the role that religion, long believed to be fated to disappear into the private sphere, played in the modernization of Peru. It offers a compelling example of the way that even the most apparently “radical” changes reproduce traditions and by doing so unwittingly maintain foundational structures. Because Maryknoll missionaries’ efforts depended on spiritual and material resources they brought from the United States, their experience in Peru also illustrates the role of religion in relations between the United States and Latin America. Maryknoll missionaries, and other Catholic clergy, in many ways set the stage for contemporary globalization.

Maryknoll Missionaries in Peru

Maryknoll’s decision to establish a mission in Peru, like its results, seemed serendipitous. The advent of the war, which closed Maryknoll’s mission fields in Asia and barred access to the rest of the world, made Latin America the only viable mission alternative. But Latin America was Catholic. It had been Catholic longer than the United States, where European Catholic immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth century had been the dominant force behind a powerful church. When Maryknoll Superior General James E. Walsh announced his intention to send to Latin America missionaries returned from Asia and those newly ordained, he appealed for a change in Maryknoll’s mission emphasis, from saving “heathens” to providing for “abandoned and needy peoples.” “Mission,” to Latin America’s Catholics, meant pro-
viding not only sacraments and prayers but also social and economic assistance to strengthen the church. This early emphasis on spiritual as well as material aid defined the Maryknoll mission to Latin America.

While Maryknoll’s mission to Latin America responded to church demands, it also conformed with the growing interest of the United States in the region. In 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared his Good Neighbor policy for Latin America. To some Catholics in the United States the policy appeared little more than a ploy to ensure access to Latin American resources and support during the war. But the Good Neighbor policy also offered Catholics a chance to play a role in their country’s foreign policy, and Maryknoll was quick to embrace this possibility in its mission appeals. It suggested that Catholic missionaries could strengthen relations between the United States and Latin America by basing them on a shared faith. Missionaries could serve as “good will ambassadors for the United States.” In Latin America Maryknoll missionaries would serve God and country.

Peru became one of the greatest beneficiaries of Vatican and U.S. interest in the region. Peru’s papal nuncios played a crucial role in appealing for foreign clergy, but their work was possible because of a long history of cooperation between the Peruvian church and state. In contrast to much of Latin America, where a scarcity of clergy resulted from Liberal reforms in the nineteenth century that promoted separation of church and state and requisitioned church resources, Peru maintained Catholicism as the country’s official religion and the government pledged economic support to the church. The Vatican responded to this largess by allowing the Peruvian government to retain the *patronato real* — the right to name bishops and to establish religious jurisdictions. Peru effectively retained some control over the church. A scarcity of economic resources ensured, however, that even though the state supported the church it did not provide enough to pay clergy’s salaries, maintain church buildings, or promote Catholic institutions. The number of clergy in Peru plummeted after independence, especially in the most impoverished, most indigenous, and therefore least “desirable” departments (states). Catholic clergy were concentrated in urban centers, and Lima remained the center of religious, political, and economic power. The history of cooperation between church and

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state, while it did not compensate for the scarcity of clergy, ensured that the church and the state would together guide Maryknoll missionaries’ incorporation into Peruvian society.

When Walsh traveled to Peru looking for a mission he met with immediate success. Initially, he hoped to send missionaries to Lima to work with the Chinese population, a remnant of Peru’s nineteenth-century guano boom whose demand for labor led to the “importation” of some 100,000 “Chinese coolies” who remained in the country, settled, and established a powerful presence in urban centers. Working with Peruvian Chinese offered continuity with Maryknoll’s mission fields in China. But Peru and Latin America generally were sites for change. The Quechua and Aymara indigenous majority in rural areas appeared the neediest and most abandoned in Peru. Maryknoll shared with Peruvian government and church officials and even contemporary anthropologists the belief that “Indians” were the most backward of Latin America’s Catholics. Walsh suggested that the Spanish colonial mission had been a tremendous success “as far as it had gone,” but it had not gone far enough. Spanish missionaries baptized believers who practiced a “folk Catholicism” that incorporated sanctioned Catholic and traditional indigenous practices identified by Maryknoll and others as pre-Columbian or “pagan.”

Walsh hoped to establish an “Indian Apostolate,” where Maryknoll missionaries could complete the job started by their Spanish predecessors by establishing Romanized practices of Catholicism emphasizing sacraments and knowledge of prayer, catechism, and doctrine. Walsh recounted that when he appealed to Peru’s papal nuncio for a mission to the indigenous, the nuncio responded “like a trout grabbing a fly, [saying] there was work waiting everywhere.” Almost immediately Walsh received an assignment for his priests to go to Puno, a remote highland region in southern Peru notorious for the difficult conditions of life. Father Francis Garvey, among the first Maryknollers to the region, reported a warning by Father Carey, a mission veteran: “‘Get rugged, Fathers; get rugged.’ . . . [O]ur house in Puno is at an elevation of nearly 13,000 feet. Moreover the weather is cold. . . . ‘Hace frio,’ is the only comment people have for Puno. Inquiries from parties who had been there, garnered the following replies: ‘words just
can't possibly describe how miserable it is.' And from a Peruvian, 'it is the worst place in South America. God certainly never intended that any of his creatures should be forced to live there.' At the time, just twenty-eight priests served Puno's population of 645,000, 92 percent of whom spoke Quechua or Aymara and lived in widely dispersed communities separated by nearly impassable mountainous terrain. Peru's papal nuncio, the local bishop, and even the government looked to Maryknoll for spiritual and material aid to the abandoned diocese. As a result, Maryknoll missionaries became unwitting participants in church-state efforts to extend control over a region desperate for aid.

Maryknoll's initial mission to Puno quickly expanded to urban areas, where the missionaries filled a void left by the impoverished church and the weak national government among the poor and an emerging middle class. In the mid-1950s Maryknoll opened missions in Lima and Arequipa that served the middle class and a new migrant poor settled in barriadas. The barriadas, a visible manifestation of Peru's truncated process of modernization, lacked physical infrastructure, including electricity, potable water, schools, meeting centers, and social services. The absence of resources reflected Peru's existing power structures. The rural poor were caught between a powerful rural landowning elite that exploited their labor and controlled the land and an urban industrializing elite that offered few jobs and no infrastructure to migrants seeking both. Maryknoll effectively stepped, or was pushed, into this void by establishing parishes in barriadas and facilitating the development of infrastructure. It was able to do so because of close ties with the U.S. government, which channeled economic resources and personnel through Maryknoll programs, and because of the close ties between the Peruvian church and state.

In 1954 the United States created a “food for peace” program to distribute surplus grains and other foodstuffs produced at home to impoverished countries abroad. Like most U.S. aid programs, Food for Peace benefited the national economy as much or more than it did the economy of the aid recipients, who were responsible for paying transport fees and eliminating important tariffs. The program also confronted the challenge of all international aid programs: how to distribute resources to the neediest. U.S. Catholic Relief Services (CRS),
established during World War II to serve refugees, offered one means to address this challenge. With links to a plethora of Catholic mission organizations in remote regions throughout the world, CRS could facilitate food distribution.

Maryknoll’s leaders had direct ties with CRS, allowing them to aid in this endeavor. In 1954 Maryknoll established a CRS-Cáritas office in Puno, and missionaries also promoted distribution of aid in Lima, where in 1957 Cardinal Landázuri created the Mission to Lima to address the increasing challenge of migration and poverty.36 Maryknoll missionaries also channeled U.S. aid through networks they established to introduce Romanized Catholicism, and this aid in turn strengthened the networks and facilitated missionaries’ expanding reach through Peru. It also ensured that secular and religious forces were inextricably linked and strengthened the traditional power of the church in Peru, even as the church became increasingly dependent on foreign resources and personnel.

As Maryknoll clergy expanded their mission to include distribution of U.S. aid and thereby strengthened and extended networks among the country’s poor and middle class, Peruvian clergy who had studied theology in postwar Europe began to return to their country.37 These members of the clergy returning home in the late 1950s entered at a moment of profound structural change characterized by urbanization and industrialization that caused social displacement and poverty and of an equally profound religious transformation resulting from the globalization of the Catholic Church. In the postwar period the Peruvian church and government created a plethora of new religious jurisdictions in the country’s poorest rural and urban areas.38 Foreign clergy, like those associated with Maryknoll, who entered the country in increasing numbers, became responsible for serving these impoverished areas.

In the 1950s Maryknoll spearheaded programs to develop networks to address the religious needs of the country’s poor and emerging middle class: catechetical programs, radio schools, credit and housing cooperatives, and health programs transcended the distinct regions and classes of Peru. These networks facilitated the introduction of Romanized Catholicism but also the distribution of resources. At the
same time they contributed to a new awareness and access by Peruvian clergy to regions historically inaccessible. Peruvian clergy returning home in the postwar period with their knowledge of European theology emphasizing concern for poverty began to analyze their society in the context of these new realities and the new access provided by foreign clergy. Resources offered by foreign clergy through their countries of origin also facilitated the development of progressive Catholic centers, where clergy and laity met to analyze social realities in light of their faith. While foreign clergy concentrated, or were concentrated in, the country’s marginal sectors (the poor and middle class in rural departments and the periphery of urban centers), national clergy established links to organized, privileged groups in urban Lima: workers, university students, and the military.

In the same years, the Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch, director of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA/CEPAL), began to articulate what became the foundation of the influential dependency theory. The “backwardness” of Latin America and other “third world” regions, argued Prebisch, did not result from internal conditions (backward Indians, lack of education, geography, Catholicism) but from their relationship with the industrialized world (the United States and Europe). While the “third world” provided raw materials produced by cheap, nonunionized labor, the “first world” relied on well-paid unionized workers to transform these raw materials into finished products that were sold back to the “third world” at higher prices. These conditions of “dependency” prevented “backward” nations from following the linear path to development carved by the “first world.”

In 1958 Vice President Richard Nixon visited Latin America. At San Marcos University in Lima he was attacked by furious crowds. It was a clear sign of Latin Americans’ deep dissatisfaction with U.S. policy in the region. During the Good Neighbor era the United States had promised to provide aid to the region in exchange for cooperation—a promise never fulfilled. Moreover, the United States demonstrated a disturbing willingness to intervene directly in countries whose policies it opposed. Just four years earlier, in 1954, the United States had directed the overthrow of the democratically elected
reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. Just one year later, Fidel Castro overthrew the U.S.-supported government of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba.

It seemed evident to political leaders that U.S. policy had to change or a wave of Communist-inspired movements might take over Latin America. President Dwight D. Eisenhower initiated the Act of Bogotá in 1959, creating the Inter-American Development Bank to provide loans as the first phase of a reformist response. Maryknoll Father John Considine immediately recognized the potential of the act. He wrote to his counterpart, Frank Norris, at CRS, to coordinate plans for the Catholic Church to initiate programs that could be funded by the Act of Bogotá and the Inter-American Development Bank. Peru was among the first beneficiaries of these new resources. Credit and housing cooperative programs introduced by Maryknoll Father Daniel McLellan in the mid-1950s immediately gained access to large loans. U.S. aid again seemed to follow established Catholic Church channels, with Maryknoll a leading force in guiding this incorporation and Peru a key beneficiary.

In 1961 the Vatican and the U.S. government issued separate but mutually reinforcing appeals for aid to Latin America. John F. Kennedy, who approved the Act of Bogotá, recognized it as the foundation for the Alliance for Progress, which he introduced immediately after his presidential inauguration in 1961. Kennedy pledged $20 billion in aid for reform programs in Latin America, asserting in an obvious reference to the Cuban Revolution, but also as an echo of Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy, that “those who make peaceful revolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable.” Also in 1961, Pope John XXIII, with the help and encouragement of Father Considine, who the year before had been named director of the U.S. National Catholic Welfare Conference’s Latin American Bureau (NCWC-LAB), issued an appeal to clergy in the United States to send 10 percent of their representatives to Latin America to address the scarcity of clergy and the threat of communism. The number of foreign clergy in Latin America surged. Both the Alliance for Progress and the appeal for clergy called explicitly for means to alleviate poverty and also recognized that a failure to do so threatened the region by making its people vulnerable to Communist appeals.
Peru became a primary beneficiary of these mutually reinforcing church/U.S. government programs. Peru received 68 percent of the U.S. diocesan clergy who responded to the pope’s appeal, and Father Considine helped to coordinate this influx through Peru’s papal nuncio, Archbishop Romulo Carboni. Carboni appealed to bishops in Peru to describe their needs, which could then be channeled through NCWC-LAB so that Considine could coordinate with diocesan clergy to secure the most appropriate places for them.49

By the 1960s the Catholic Church in Peru, which had been relatively moribund less than two decades earlier, had become the most vibrant force in the country. It had networks extending from the poorest barriadas of urban Peru to the remotest communities in the countryside and to the centers of power in Lima. Moreover, through foreign networks the church had access to vast economic resources, and through national clergy closely affiliated with a progressive hierarchy and trained in the most innovative theological currents the church had a transformative force of ideas. All these influences were in place well before the advent of the Second Vatican Council, credited with transforming the church in Latin America. Liberation theology appeared an exclusively Latin American movement, but it was really the product of a globalized Catholic Church centered in Latin America.

Maryknoll and the Peruvian Church after the Second Vatican Council

In the early 1970s Maryknoll missionaries enjoyed opportunities and suffered obstacles created during the preceding decades of mission in Peru. Mission to the poor in rural Puno and in urban barriadas placed Maryknoll in the vanguard of the liberation theology church. The missionaries participated actively in the most important centers of progressive Catholicism in Lima, where they joined with Gutiérrez, Cardinal Landázuri, Bishops Luis Bambarén and Germán Schmitz, and the biological brothers Fathers Jorge and Carlos Álvarez Calderón who were leaders in Catholic youth and workers’ movements. Maryknoll also promoted new centers that produced some of the most important proclamations on behalf of the poor. Maryknoll prelates Eduardo Fedders and Alberto Koenigsknecht of Juli joined forces

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with the hierarchy of Cuzco, Puno, Ayaviri, Sicuani, and Chuquibamba and collectively became the “voice of the poor” in southern Peru. Although foreign clergy constituted the majority of the Iglesia del Sur Andino, Peruvian bishops provided its public face. Maryknoll priests also participated actively in the National Office of Social Information (ONIS), a group of progressive clergy established by Peruvian Father Romeo Luna Victoria at the meeting where Gutiérrez first presented *A Theology of Liberation*. Like the Iglesia del Sur Andino, ONIS was composed almost entirely of foreign clergy, with Maryknollers among the core members, but the public face of the organization was Peruvian.

Maryknoll missionaries, in concert with Peruvian clergy, also formed part of a new vanguard to valorize indigenous culture. The Velasco military regime tended to focus more on class than on race or ethnicity. Some researchers have suggested that this emphasis helps to explain why in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and, to a lesser extent, Chile, indigenous movements formed in the 1980s and 1990s became the vanguard of social and political transformation, while in Peru indigenous identity issues remained in the background. The Velasco regime emphasized the campesino and the worker, class identities that in some measure tried to eradicate symbolically indigenous culture and ethnicity even as they supported “the poor.” By contrast, Maryknoll and other key actors in the Catholic Church increasingly valorized indigenous culture and sought to increase knowledge of and respect for it. Maryknoll established the Instituto de Estudios Aymaras (IDEA) in Chucuito, Puno, to promote knowledge of Aymara language and culture. The missionaries also supported the Instituto de Pastoral Andina (IPA), founded by the bishops of the Iglesia del Sur Andino in Cuzco in 1969 to develop pastoral programs that engaged indigenous religious ideas and practices to promote an Andeanized Catholicism. And they expanded language programs to promote Aymara by training indigenous teachers and providing language courses to pastoral agents in Cochabamba, Bolivia, the seminary in Juliaca, the Centro de Bartolomé de las Casas in Cuzco, and IDEA in Chucuito. Indigenous identity thus became central to the modern church and, by implication, society. The central role of indigenous identity dramatically contradicted the long-held assumption among Western researchers that...
“primitive” or “traditional” communities would disappear as societies modernized.

Even as Maryknoll and the progressive Peruvian Catholic Church embraced the preferential option for the poor, indigenous identity, and a more open, modern liberation theology promoting the rights of the marginal, it also reproduced existing power structures. Power followed existing hierarchies. Peruvian clergy based in Lima remained the most important sources of authority in the liberation theology church. Cardinal Landázuri actively supported the progressive clergy and became the voice of last resort in all conflicts between the church and the government. Progressive Peruvian bishops and clergy followed, with power focused in urban centers and spreading out to the marginal urban and rural areas. Not a single indigenous individual, layperson, or female religious became a dominant part of the public face of the progressive church. In Peru it was accurate to say that the church became a voice of the poor, but the poor remained silent and hidden.55

Maryknoll Sisters: A Hidden Force

These conditions offered women religious, including Maryknoll sisters, an opportunity. The first Maryknoll sisters arrived in Peru in 1951. Within Maryknoll and the patriarchal Catholic Church, sisters served as auxiliaries to priests. They provided services as acts of Christian charity that manifested their faith. The Maryknoll sisters in Peru were teachers, social workers, and nurses. Their subordinate status as auxiliaries, their provision of services, and their autonomy within subordination granted sisters a distinct means to gain access to local communities. As teachers, Maryknoll sisters visited their students’ homes, which afforded them special insight into the conditions of people’s lives and the nature of family and community. As nurses, they participated in the most intimate aspects of peoples’ lives and shared with them experiences of extreme vulnerability: illness, childbirth, and injury. As social workers, they participated in the distribution of resources in ways that brought them into people’s lives.

Maryknoll sisters were closely aligned with the direction of the church after the Second Vatican Council. In the 1950s they had participated in many of the programs initiated by the Maryknoll fathers
in Peru but had not directed them; they relied on indigenous catechists to provide inoculations and distribute food but did not direct catechetical programs; and they taught in Maryknoll schools but were overseen by priests. After the Second Vatican Council, Maryknoll sisters left the institutional structures of schools and hospitals, but the nature of their service as a manifestation of charity and faith did not radically change. In fact, sisters may have had more opportunities to live the ideals of the church of the poor than did priests, because they did not have to escape the identities they had established during the preceding decade. Moreover, their identity was not tied to the sacramental foundation of the church. If foreign clergy were the invisible base of the progressive Peruvian church, sisters were nearly subterranean.

The Maryknoll experience in Peru illustrates that the Catholic Church played a central role in contemporary modernization and in relations between the United States and Latin America. It also shows that progressive programs did not necessarily play out as they appeared. And finally, it offers insight into the way missionaries lived their experience without always being conscious of the larger structures of which they were a part. For the men and women of Maryknoll, mission was their lives. Most sought to fulfill a religious promise that offered them a chance to make a difference in the world. They wanted to live their faith. And they did so in remarkably difficult conditions. Even given the allowances they made for themselves during their first years, Maryknoll missionaries suffered conditions for a lifetime that few Western researchers tolerate for more than nine months. Thus understanding these larger structural changes is in part about understanding how and why people made their life choices. This book attempts to introduce the experience of the Maryknoll missionaries in Peru to understand these choices and their unintended consequences.

Methodology and Structure

This book is based on a combination of archival research, interviews, and participant observation undertaken from 1995 to 1996, 1997 to
1998, and 2000 to 2001. I spent most of that time in Peru, where I did research in the archives of the bishops in Puno and Juli, in the provincial archives of Puno, in the Puno library’s collection of newspapers, and in the archives of El Comercio, a daily newspaper in Lima. During that time I also interviewed Maryknoll clergy working in the country. For four months in 1997, I lived in Cutini Capilla, an Aymara community outside of Juli, to gain insight into indigenous life and culture. In addition to research in Peru, I conducted extensive archival research and interviews at the Maryknoll mission center in upstate New York. This work, which included follow-up studies in 2000 and 2001, allowed me to consult the official diaries kept by Maryknoll fathers and sisters in Peru from 1943 to 1968, to review interviews recorded by the Maryknoll Society History Project, and to examine Maryknoll publicity materials, including the Field Afar/Maryknoll.

The chapters are organized chronologically, with each detailing a shift in Maryknoll mission methods and practices. Maryknoll missionaries’ status as a transnational Catholic organization based in the United States meant that mission was defined and redefined by changes in the universal Catholic Church, the Latin American church, the U.S. church and society, and the missionaries’ experience in Peru. Chapter 1 examines the foundation of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America and the Catholic Foreign Mission Sisters of St. Dominic, together known as Maryknoll. Most of the men and women who joined Maryknoll and supported it with donations were working- or middle-class “white ethnics” from the northeastern and midwestern United States. They shared a distinct Catholic ethos formed by the experience of immigration, exclusion, and labor.

Chapter 2 examines the period from 1943, when the first missionaries settled in Puno, to 1953. This decade represented more than anything else a period of dramatic culture shock. The Maryknoll missionaries believed when they settled in Puno that people would respect them and embrace immediately the model of Romanized Catholicism they sought to establish. The missionaries’ efforts to impose their ideals and practices brought them into immediate conflict with Peru’s Catholic communities. Moreover, the missionaries discovered that they had to adapt not only to local practices of faith but also to the daunting physical environment of Puno.
Chapter 3 begins with the 1954 Lima Mission Methods Conference organized by Maryknoll Father John Considine, a central force behind Maryknoll and, in many ways, the U.S. mission to Latin America. The conference marked the beginning of a new phase in mission to Latin America and in Maryknoll's mission to Peru. It followed on the heels of a Semana Pastoral held in Chimbote, Peru, to assess the state of the Catholic Church in Latin America. Both the Semana Pastoral and the Lima Mission Methods Conference represented the first efforts to address mission to Latin America systematically by assessing the condition of the church, articulating mission goals, and developing methods to achieve those goals. Maryknoll introduced these mission methods to the newly created prelature in Juli, which was placed under the missionaries' control in 1957, and in urban Puno, Lima, and Arequipa. Maryknoll sisters arrived in Peru in 1951 and became an important force in the country.

Chapter 4 takes up the period from 1968 to 1979. It begins by focusing on the confluence of the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín and the military coup that brought the reformist General Velasco to power. It concludes in 1979 with the official declaration of separation of church and state in the new Peruvian constitution and the beginning of the Shining Path.

Chapter 5 examines the period from the mid-1970s through 1989, when Peru was devastated by the Shining Path and military repression. It analyzes the transformation of Maryknoll into part of a broader movement within the progressive Catholic Church to support human rights in Peru. It argues that the Catholic human rights network evolved from the church structures established during the preceding decades to serve the poor. The legitimacy earned through their efforts and the fact that the church was targeted by both the Shining Path and the Peruvian armed forces allowed it to serve as a mediating force in society. This role culminated in the formation of the Peruvian Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in 2001.

The epilogue describes briefly Maryknoll's contemporary position in the United States and the missionaries' fate in Peru with conservative forces dominating the local church.