In 1968, following the publication of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on “human life,” Catholics worldwide rose up in arms – some to defend the pope, others to attack him. Two of the pope’s most vigorous defenders met in Philadelphia in the week that the encyclical was issued. One was Cesar Chavez, the American civil-rights activist who revolutionized migrant labor law; the other was a little-known Polish law professor named Ludwik Dembiński. It was Dembiński, as secretary-general of the Swiss-based Catholic international Pax Romana, who had invited Chavez to keynote the association’s annual conference. It was Dembiński who corralled dissenting delegates after Chavez delivered a ringing endorsement of the Catholic ban on contraception. And he did so in large part because of an ideology that defined his self-understanding as a global activist: Catholic socialism.

Celebrated as the papacy of Polish-born John Paul II is for its putative agency in “ending the Cold War,” rare is the acknowledgment of Eastern European agency in transnational and global processes of the Catholic Church’s own transformation throughout the 20th century. This paper will argue for the recovery of the concept of “Catholic socialism” – both for its heuristic value, and as a category employed by historical actors. Beginning in 1945, several generations of Catholic activists in postwar Poland believed in a fusion of the Catholic faith with state socialism. Under Stalinism, their convictions drove *bona fide* participation in the international peace movement and in the Polish organization PAX. After 1956, “Catholic socialism” enabled Poles associated with the Catholic Intelligentsia Club (KIK) movement to assume leadership roles in cross-Iron Curtain initiatives, bringing them into fora as diverse as Pax Romana, the United Nations, and the Second Vatican Council. It is impossible to understand the origins and significance of John Paul II’s papacy without a clear understanding of Catholic socialism’s genealogy.

Finally, this is not just a story of Poland’s “transnationalization”: it is, rather, a case study in the crossing of boundaries between First, Second, and Third Worlds at the height of the global Cold War. On matters of international development, contraception, and evangelical expansion, these three “camps” aligned and re-aligned many times between 1945 and 1991. Understanding the crucial role of organized religion – and the Catholic Church in particular – in the global dimension of the Cold War is impossible without attention to Eastern European agency in these processes.