



The Catholic Effervescence: Catholic Church, Society and Politics in Argentina between 1955 and 1976

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Abstract

The following paper addresses a complex period in Argentine history spanning from the coup d'état against Juan Domingo Perón in 1955 to the onset of the last dictatorship, known as the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, in 1976. It also explores the intricate role of the Catholic Church, which, with the latest development of religious historiography, has been acknowledged as a multifaceted, complex agent in a process of change where the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) seemed to disrupt the established order. Beyond the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which received the most attention from scholars, it encompasses other voices, such as priests, laypeople, and religious women. The primary objective is to examine how the Catholic Church interpreted the social, cultural, and political changes, as well as the conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s, in order to understand its internal diversity and how it was impacted by internal secularization, understood as the erosion of the legitimacy of religious authority.

Keywords Argentine Catholic Church · Latin American religions · Argentine history · Second Vatican Council

Introduction

In a landmark book in the field of studies on the Catholic Church, society and politics in Argentina, Di Stefano and Zanatta (2000: 479) argued that, after the coup d'état against Perón in 1955,

[...] not only did the [Catholic] Church increasingly assert itself as a central institution of the political order, but also the adherence of the rulers in office to its doctrinal corpus was imposing itself as a discriminating element of its

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legitimization, at least in the eyes of the «sovereigns behind the throne», that is the Armed Forces.

In this regard, the renewed legitimacy that the bishops would see in the following decades in the national *agora* would contrast with the growing internal conflict that was simmering within the institution. This is well-documented, thanks to the ongoing renewal of religious historiography in Argentina, and certainly in the broader international religious historiographical context. Scholars, utilizing methodologies from political, social, and cultural studies, and engaging in discussions with other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, have turned their focus towards other subjects of study within the Catholic Church, including Catholic intellectuals, the press, and religious orders (Zanca, 2006; Lida, 2015; Pattin, 2019, Touris, 2021). Consequently, it becomes evident that the Catholic Church encompassed far more than just its bishops and its traditional alignment with the State's power. After the coup d'état, many Catholics would reevaluate their positions and regret their active involvement, while others would solidify their anti-Peronist perspectives.

Although the relationship with Peronism initially began with broad terms, marked by more or less explicit and mutual understandings, as well as somewhat reciprocal commitments, the political use of Catholicism as a discourse that held social legitimacy in itself ultimately gave rise to a "Peronist Christianity" –*cristianismo peronista*– (Caimari, 2010). In other words, it was a form of replacement or substitution for traditional Christianity, aiming to replace Catholic representations by establishing new forms of what was considered good and bad Catholicism. Similarly, Peronist social policies encroached upon spaces of assistance that had traditionally been the domain of the Catholic Church, creating significant tensions between religious and political authorities. Despite the advantages gained by the Catholic Church, such as increased presence in the public sphere and influence over religious education in public schools, the relationship deteriorated rapidly in the later years of Perón's administration. This deterioration was due to various factors, including the prohibition of public religious manifestations, the removal of religious teaching in schools, the promotion of divorce, the legal equivalence between legitimate and extramarital children, the new prophylaxis law, the removal of tax exemptions for the Church, the establishment of the Christian Democratic Party, and the unsuccessful attempt to separate Church and State through a constitutional reform in 1954. The active engagement of the laity in the coup d'état, occasionally without the concurrence of bishops who favored the constant negotiations, catalyzed certain internal conflicts in which obedience to authority was eclipsed by the street-level confrontations. Consequently, beyond their initial agreements, the Catholic Church witnessed how Peronism assumed responsibilities and discourses that had previously been associated with the religious institution, displacing it or at least competing with it for the role of representing the transcendent values of Argentina. In sum, the confrontation between Peronism and the Catholic Church revealed the boundaries, negotiations, and thresholds of secularism and the secularization of Argentine society.

The ongoing intervention of the hierarchy in national politics, which can be traced back to its institutionalization, led to the internalization of social conflicts that would challenge its ability to govern or maintain order within the religious community in

the years to come. While the coup d'état against Perón can be seen as an event that solidified the public role of the bishops as moral guardians of order and the influence of Catholicism in the country's public life, a series of tensions within the specialized branches of Argentine Catholic Action (ACA) played a significant role in the political and religious landscape that followed. That is to say, Catholic associations developed since the beginning of the twentieth century to organize the Catholic *milieu* against modernity such as the Catholic Workers' Youth (JOC), the Workers' Movement of Catholic Action (MOAC), the Catholic Students' Youth (JEC), the Catholic University Youth (JUC), the Rural Movement of Catholic Action (MRAC), or the Rural Youth of Catholic Action (JRAC) were formed in these years by a young generation that possessed the mandate to re-Christianize the world. However, this generation also demonstrated high levels of rebellion against the hierarchy's mandates in their political affiliations, professional commitments, and intellectual preferences (Lida, 2015). The generational conflict that had been simmering for decades contained a significant portion of the discussions that unfolded during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and in the years that followed, particularly regarding the Church's relationship with the world, society, and politics.

French sociologist François-André Isambert (1976), intrigued by the cultural transformations of modernity, introduced the concept of “internal secularization” to comprehend this complex period within the Catholic *milieu*. Isambert focused on the process of the diminishing the influence of religious authority in public life, highlighting that it initially resided within the religious community itself. Authority no longer existed as an “absolute judge,” prescribing proper and virtuous practices and representations. Instead, conversely, Catholic believers retained the capacity for making decisions regarding their own Catholic customs and interpretations, this phenomenon would gradually disseminate throughout the broader society. In the same vein, the American sociologist Mark Chaves (1993 and 1994) concurs that secularization involves a process of diminishing the legitimacy of religious authority both internally and externally. Therefore, beyond the grand theories of secularization, the concept of “internal secularization” emerges as a general trend characterized by the waning legitimacy of religious authorities and their manifest inability to regulate the practices and representations within the religious community. In this regard, following the insights of the French scholar Danièle Hervieu-Leger (2005), one does not witness the disappearance of religion but rather its constant reconfiguration.¹

¹ The grand theories of secularization once posited that modernity, understood as a process encompassing democratization, industrialization, urbanization, and literacy, and would lead to the gradual disappearance of religion or its influence in the public sphere. This would also result in religion retreating to the private sphere and a disenchantment of the world (Weber 1983, 2002). Secularization was considered an “inevitable” and “natural” process in Western societies, where, following medieval Christendom, religion withdrew into the intimate domain. However, the persistence of religion in public life, the multidimensionality of secularization (Dobbelaere, 1994), and the emergence of new religious movements challenged these grand theories. In a seminal work within the field of religious studies, José Casanova (2000) identifies three related but independent elements in secularization theories: (1) the distinction of spheres and the increasing emancipation of religious norms and institutions, (2) the privatization of religion as a normative condition or precondition of liberal democratic politics, and (3) the decline of religious practices and beliefs. While the elements outlined in (1) and (3) can still be sociologically supported, point (2) is historically and factually refutable, meaning it is impossible to deny the growing presence of religion in the public sphere. The de-privatization of religion would not refute the general thesis of secularization,

A Catholic Church's Overview

One may wonder about the nature of the Catholic Church in the second half of the twentieth century. After a relatively stagnant period in the 1940s, partly due to the competition resulting from the expansion of the State into social areas during Peronism, the Catholic Church entered a period of rapid growth. The 11 dioceses of the 1930s became 46 — 11 archdioceses and 35 dioceses — at the time of the opening of Second Vatican. Between 1957 and 1963, 26 new dioceses were created at the pace of the accelerated process of modernization of Argentine society. On the one hand, the creation of new ecclesiastical provinces responded to the demographic growth in Greater Buenos Aires where the archdiocese was divided into suffragan dioceses such as Avellaneda or San Martín. At the same time, new dioceses were intended to shelter very wide-ranging or “impoverished” or, in the language of the developmentalism of the time, “underdeveloped” territories. This explains the design of the new dioceses in different provinces such as Añatuya, Concordia, Goya, Neuquén, Orán, Rafaela, Río Gallegos, San Francisco, and San Rafael. This period could be depicted by the tension between the recognition of the lost ground against modernity nourished by the old militant spirit from the beginning of the century and the epochal climate encouraged by the return to a missionary and pilgrim Church on the eve of Second Vatican. As Lida (2015: 233) indicated, there was no lack of post-conciliar elements *avant la lettre*. The Catholic Church endeavored to develop pastoral policies to engage with the industrial workers of the Buenos Aires industrial belt, whose relationship had soured due to the active involvement of Catholics in the coup against Perón.

The Catholic Church was not solely proliferating but also being structured in formal terms. The institution was organized around an Episcopal Conference, established precisely during this period, which convened once a year and had an inflexible, vertical, and hierarchical governance structure (Zanatta, 1996). This institutional structure allowed for wide discretionary powers, with the president holding the bulk of administrative authority. The Permanent Commission, the active institutional body during recesses, was exclusively composed of cardinals. Although bishops enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in their dioceses, especially in the newly created ones, the central bodies responsible for defining national pastoral policies were governed by a generation that was generally resistant to change or renewal in the Argentine Catholic Church. As an example, in 1962, the Permanent Commission was led by Antonio Caggiano, a central figure in the Catholic Church during those years, along with ten archbishops who had been appointed between 1927 and 1943 by Pius XI and Pius XII. A sociological analysis conducted by de

Footnote 1 (continued)

as the transition to the common sphere can occur in ways consistent with the fundamental requirements of modern society. The privatization of religion, once considered a pillar of secularization, is not essential to modernity because what matters is how religion becomes public. Asad (2003) emphasizes that when religion becomes an integral part of modern politics, it is not indifferent to how the economy should be managed, which scientific projects should be financially supported by the state, or the goals of the national education system.

Imaz (1964) revealed that the majority of the Argentine episcopate, appointed between the 1930s and 1940s, were typically the sons of immigrants, often Italians, who came to the Church with little to none cultural capital, indicating a high level of dependence on the institution. The archetypical Argentine bishop was born between 1890 and 1910, hailing from rural backgrounds, countryside or small towns, with little urban heritage. They had typically studied in Rome at the Pontifical Pio Latin American College, with a focus on Canon Law, over other subjects like Theology or Philosophy. The bishops were appointed through a patronage system that was still in place, with suggestions or postulations from the Apostolic Nunciature in Argentina, making the nuncio a key figure in understanding the evolution of the local religious body. Umberto Mozzoni, who served as nuncio between 1958 and 1969, maintained a strongly conservative line, even as a young generation of bishops would occupy significant dioceses in the years to come (Di Stefano and Zanatta, 2000: 418–486). In this regard, the figure of Caggiano, who in 1959 would be appointed archbishop of Buenos Aires, would condense the typical characteristics of the old generation of bishops up until the mid-1970s. Formed towards the end of the nineteenth century in a strict theological Thomism where the Catholic Church was projected as a *societas perfecta*, he lived the Catholic renaissance of the 1930s and faced an increasingly secularized society that, beyond respecting the religious institution, adopted patterns of behavior far from the good Catholic practices in the following decades. In addition, Caggiano had to face the Cold War and Third Worldism — political and religious — that would increasingly exacerbate a scenario marked by the proscription of Peronism, the fear of communist infiltration and military coups. During this period, the archbishop of Buenos Aires not only sought to administer the complex diocese but also to uphold traditional theological and pastoral criteria, mediate in labor conflicts, and position himself as a meta-political social actor by virtue of his perceived moral authority. Although by the 1970s, his influence would notably decline, his presence would offer stability to the Vatican. Hence, notwithstanding his resignation at the age of 75, he would continue to hold the Archbishopric of Buenos Aires until his passing in 1979.

Mallimaci (1993: 62–83) analyzed the 33 responses sent by the bishops in the ante-preparatory phase to Domenico Tardini, prefect of the Holy Congregation for Ecclesiastical Affairs because of Second Vatican. Most of them aimed at ratifying the pyramidal structure of the Catholic Church, the authority of the bishop and the anti-modernist core of Catholicism. The adjustment to the local language in the mass and sacraments, the *aggiornamento* of the vestments (clergyman) and a greater — and better — biblical formation of the believers were also on the agenda of the Argentine bishops. Nevertheless, more daring answers are also to be seen, which recommended a reevaluation — and even theology — of the laity and, beyond the forewarnings made during the pontificate of Pius XII, the extension of the use of the vernacular language in the mass. According to Mallimaci, two answers stand out: the one of Germiniano Esorto — conservative archbishop of Bahía Blanca, an important dioceses in the south of Buenos Aires — and the one of Juan José Iriarte — progressive bishop of Reconquista, a relatively new northern diocese — who considered it necessary to allow new pastoral experiences. While, in the case of Esorto, the openness proposals came from his chancellor secretary Norman

Pipo, advisor of the JUC, who combined the contributions of the parish group of Todos los Santos y Ánimas of the city of Buenos Aires led by the priests Alfredo Trusso and Miguel Ramondetti, in the case of Iriarte, the ideas were nourished by the trajectory of a bishop who had studied law not only in Buenos Aires but also in Rome and Paris, and promoted a continuous renovation of the Church.

Esorto and Iriarte, when considered alongside the other responses, not only underscored the Argentine bishops' excessive respect for the Roman survey and Tardini but also revealed the limited readiness of the Argentine episcopate to complicate its pastoral agenda and actively participate in the Second Vatican. Despite a less-than-promising outlook regarding the potential leadership of Argentine bishops in Rome, Pope John XXIII appointed Enrique Angelelli as a bishop in December 1960, followed by Alberto Devoto and Vicente Zazpe in June 1961, and Antonio Quarracino in February 1962. These bishops were notable for their pastoral, liturgical, or catechetical initiatives. Their promotions paved the way for the consolidation of a minority but thriving group of bishops who were focused on the Church's renewal. Starting in the 1950s, one could observe the expansion of dioceses and the inclusion of young bishops who would challenge the consensus within the Argentine Episcopal Conference (CEA). Although the paths of these young bishops in the 1970s and 1980s were markedly divergent — some would delve deeper into their reformation perspectives, while others would temper their expectations in the face of more radicalized positions — the Second Vatican Council served as a unifying point for those who advocated for an *aggiornamento* of the institution, a more efficient and less ostentatious worship, as well as a closer connection with the believers, even if they constituted a minority.

It is important to remember that in the first document of the CEA following the Second Vatican, titled *Pastoral Declaration on the Church in the Postconciliar Period*, the Argentine bishops embraced the new conciliar spirit, along with the new mindset, psychology, style, and language, despite the internal turbulence it caused. In a reflection of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, they committed to developing a communal structure for the Church and its institutions, while also promoting increased engagement with the world by both clergy and laity. However, they emphasized that the same level of commitment given to the Second Vatican should also be extended to the visible Church. The hierarchy maintained that the primary reforms were not doctrinal but spiritual; the term “pastoral,” more appropriate for Roman-inspired documents, was not employed. In these reforms, the Second Vatican's mandate would be safeguarded and conveyed by the ecclesiastical magisterium, signifying that the hierarchy would oversee the *aggiornamento*.

Similarly, the meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Council in 1968 challenged the Argentine hierarchy's capacity, even more so, to control the interpretation of the Catholic renewal. Di Stefano and Zanatta (2000: 448) argued that Medellín “amplified to the nth degree, and then precipitated tensions and conflicts that had already assumed an unprecedented intensity in Argentine Catholicism since the times of the Second Vatican, especially in the realm of social and political action.” Thus, it has been understood that the Catholic crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, driven by politicization and conflict within Catholicism,

can be explained by the conciliar earthquake more than the supposed Medellín revolution. Between 1965 and 1968, there was a Catholicism in search of an agenda or a local translation of the conciliar documents. However, with Medellín, the use of concepts such as “oppression,” “liberation,” “underdevelopment,” “development,” and “poverty,” among others, became more widespread in understanding the Argentine reality. These concepts, through various actors, would shape public discussions against the backdrop of growing politicization and social conflict. From then on, the process of “internal secularization” would deepen, characterized by a diminishing ability of the hierarchies to determine the proper Catholic representations and practices.

Almost a year later and following days of discussions, the hierarchy issued a document commonly known as the “San Miguel document.” This declaration revisited Vatican II and Medellín, providing a local official discursive framework for renewal sensibilities. It reiterated the hierarchical nature of the institution while engaging in the modernization of ecclesiastical structures. At the same time, it reaffirmed the order of authority and set precise limits on revolutionary interpretations. There have been various hypotheses regarding how a hierarchy that was primarily considered conservative or traditionalist produced a document appreciated as renewer. Verbitsky’s (2009: 361) hypothesis is that it was written by a team led by Lucio Gera, Rafael Tello, and Justino O’Farrell, young theologians who infused it with a socially engaged style. However, Lucio Gera’s (Campana 1990) recollection substantially differs as he indicated that the drafting process was scattered, as it was entrusted to different episcopal commissions where bishops and *periti* gathered, resulting in a rather heterogeneous document where various voices resonated. Equally, the first traces of a theology that, in contrast to the more widespread Liberation Theology in other Latin American countries, emphasized the value of the concepts of “pueblo” and “religiosidad popular” as fundamental categories of religious experience, can be found. It did not propose pastoral work for the people but aimed to constitute the Church itself based on the notion of “pueblo.” This laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Theology of the People or the Theology of Culture that would solidify in the coming decades. However, this should not be extended to the entirety of the hierarchy, but rather the “San Miguel document” stood out as an exceptional case within the landscape of the Argentine episcopate in 1969. In this regard, Martin (1992: 88) noted that, beyond the undeniable conceptual influence of Medellín, there was an effort to confine the strong social denunciations to the third level of a more elaborate complex of ideas or a triple direction: 1. Spiritual, 2. Pastoral, and 3. Social. While the official interpretation of the Church did not explicitly contradict or oppose the documents of Medellín, it did attempt to curb the growing political and social commitment of Catholics, emphasizing the spiritual and pastoral purposes of the laity, priests, and bishops. The appointment of the traditionalist Adolfo Tortolo as the head of the CEA in 1970 confirmed the slowdown in the renewal momentum. His administrations would aim to mitigate internal conflicts by isolating and penalizing those who advocated for social and political engagement and foster spiritual renewal.

Renewal, Revolution, and Restoration

The 1960s were characterized by the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution, the revolutionary spirit in the Latin American continent, the Second Vatican, and the challenges of local politics. Naturally, the Catholic Church was influenced by this period of upheaval. In this context, the initial messages from John XXIII, who assumed office in 1959, advocated for Church reform, the revision of the Code of Canon Law, the promotion of Christian unity, and an embrace of the contemporary world (Alberigo 1999). Since then, the longest-serving bishops in Argentina and the rest of the Catholic world went from uncertainty due to the lack of clear definitions to a deep fear of the possible consequences of an event that seemed to open scenarios of dispute and conflict. In 1962, the convening of Second Vatican presented an opportunity for bishops, priests, and laity to envision different horizons of expectations. Some were worried that it might only lead to a doctrinal discussion reinforcing modernity's anathemas. Consequently, Archbishop Caggiano delivered a conference in September 1963 to the national leaders of the Central Board of the ACA, highlighting the "confusions" and "theological errors" he believed were arising from the works of theologians like Teilhard de Chardin and the *Nouvelle Théologie* (Zanca, 2020). It's worth noting that in the same year, Archbishop Caggiano removed Pironio from his position as director of the diocesan seminary in Villa Devoto, Buenos Aires, replacing him with the more moderate Nolasco. In this turbulent context, *La Gran Misión de Buenos Aires* (1960) was carried out under the slogan "Let us return to Christ through Mary," where two different narratives converged: the new conciliar language that called for Catholicism to return to a "state of mission," and the old spirit of a crusade for the re-Christianization of society. There was a shared diagnosis: the influence of Catholicism in Argentine society had diminished. Nevertheless, disagreements arose within the episcopal body when it came to discussing how to progress in order to reverse this situation.

The Argentine bishops were more open to the liturgical reform — which was quickly approved in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* — than to the ecumenical dialogue "whose spirit seemed to be out of tune with the myth that identified the confessional unity as the foundation of the Argentine identity and with the idea of the [Catholic] Church as a perfect institution and the only repository of truth" (Zanatta, 1999: 25). The vast majority was not willing to give up the traditional distinction between "truth" and "error" by capitulating to the Protestants and their "theological syncretism." Moreover, beyond the liturgical reform and the restoration of the diaconate, which occupied the attention of the Argentine hierarchy with a certain shared consensus, it is clear that the episcopate, collegiality and interreligious dialogue were not relevant issues in the post-Second Vatican resolutions. However, some bishops, even with traditional theological leanings, like Caggiano, who possessed strong public personas, promoted pastoral policies among workers and in impoverished neighborhoods (*villas miserias*). The CEA, an organ of lengthy renewal, sustained a habitus and a notion of authority, developed from the Council of Trent (1545–1563),

the Catholic Counter-Reformation (1545–1648), and above all the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). Therefore, beyond the fact that John XXIII and Paul VI inaugurated a double authority and legitimacy in the Catholic Church, since the figure of the Pope could act as an alternative discursive asylum, most of the bishops of the CEA sought to make sure that the social and political commitment of the clergy and the laity did not go beyond the guidelines of the eternal, hierarchical and organic Catholic Church. The Catholic convulsion or crisis following Second Vatican reflected the convergence of several factors, including a generational shift within the Church (unchanged for 20 years) and a more open approach to doctrinal, pastoral, and theological matters in a Church that had long adhered strongly to the concept of the religious community as a *societas perfecta* and to neo-Thomistic philosophy. In a sense, the hierarchy imposed a barrier on the burgeoning Catholic enthusiasm. This blockade naturally intersected with domestic politics, particularly the inevitable influence of Peronism, which overlapped with the expectations of the laity and the young clergy, leading to a release of these “accumulated energies” as soon as Second Vatican permitted.

In June 1965, despite Caggiano’s rigidity, ca. 80 priests met with bishops Podesta, Quarracino and Pironio to discuss priestly life, both their role within the Catholic Church and their relationship with the world. In the “Council of Quilmes,” so-called afterwards, they set up working parties with different levels of coordination and organization with priests from San Isidro, Moron, Avellaneda, La Plata, and Mercedes. In a lively exhortation to build the “kingdom of God” on earth, the priests arrived at various questions about the nature of celibacy and its functionality in the modern world. Strictly speaking, the conclusions of the “Council of Quilmes” are profoundly intra-ecclesiastical without any claims on the temporal commitment of the Catholic Church. In any case, there was still a desire to know the world rather than to propose a course of action to change it. Remarkably, the conclusions of the meeting were sent to Second Vatican despite Caggiano’s opposition. The “Council of Quilmes” initiated a series of priestly meetings held in Chapadmalal in 1966 and San Miguel in 1967 that eventually led to the creation of the Movement of Priests for the Third World (MSTM). Priestly concerns found their institutional conduit in 1967 when the CEA, through the Episcopal Pastoral Commission, promoted the National Pastoral Plan under the triumvirate of the young bishops Zazpe, Marengo, and Angelelli, but also with the presence of nuns such as Laura Renard — superior of the Auxiliares Parroquiales de María, Aida Lopez — general of the Compañía del Divino Maestro, Esther Sastre — provincial of the Hermanas del Sagrado Corazon, and lay people of Christian Democratic Party such as Ignacio Palacios Videla and Carlos Eroles, giving shape to a horizontal space for discussion and implementation of the pastoral tasks of the Catholic Church. In other words, this initiative involved the participation of nuns and lay people from the Christian Democratic Party, creating a platform for the discussion and implementation of pastoral tasks within the Catholic Church. This should be framed in a sort of continental Catholic effervescence that promoted the pastoral and theological discussion in Latin America giving rise, as an example, to congresses in the Theological Institute in Petropolis in Brazil in 1964 where theologians Juan Luis Segundo, Lucio Gera and, Gustavo Gutierrez lectured, but also in the Latin American Institute of Pastoral

Theology in Medellin in Colombia in 1965 where Segundo Galilea would expose on the relationship between theology and politics.

While the leadership of the ACA was concerned with the re-Christianization of Argentine society, the JUC and the 62 Organizaciones Peronistas of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), with the famous document entitled *En marcha hacia el cambio de estructuras* (*On the path toward structural change*) written by the Catholic sociologist Jose Luis de Imaz, committed themselves, based on an ideological framework in which Catholicism was still very present, to a social revolutionary transformation. Both organizations thus backed cost and price controls, more State intervention in the economy, agrarian reform, and the nationalization of transport, among other issues. Christian trade unionism, through the Accion Sindical Argentina (ASA) and the Movimiento Sindical Demócrata Cristiano (MSDC), also began a process of ideological radicalization in which the “change of structures” and the “social revolution” in Latin America formed a fundamental part of the renewed preaching. From the encyclicals of John XIII *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963) onwards, various Catholic nuclei began to build a contested identity that discussed private property, the socialization of means of production and recognized the differences between Marxist ideology and communist governments. In the same regard, it is understood that the Marxist-Christian dialogue was inaugurated in 1965 in the aula magna of the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) when the communist militants Fernando Nadra and Juan Carlos Rosales shared a conference with the Catholic student leader Guillermo Tedeschi and the priest Carlos Mugica.

Women’s congregations also began a process of commitment with the mundane. On many occasions, they decided to close schools or institutions aimed at the middle and upper-middle classes in order to move to the peripheries, concentrating their efforts on the poor and dispossessed (Catoggio, 2010; Touris, 2021). At some point, one could think that they were tearing down the walls of the cloisters and reconnecting with a world they saw as full of injustice and violence. This shift was part of a broader process of engagement with the secular world and a growing commitment to justice and equality. At the same time, many of them decided to abandon their religious vocation, marry — often to religious men — and move to other “underdeveloped” provinces of the country. Catholic women — religious or not — were great protagonists of a process — although limited — of autonomy and protagonism.

The Movement of Priests for the Third World (MSTM) emerged in the context of a broader wave of Catholic reform and activism in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. Various priestly groups and movements were taking shape across the region, reflecting the changes brought about by the Second Vatican and the political and social dynamics of the time. These groups included Organizacion Nacional de Informacion Social (ONIS) in Peru, Golconda in Colombia, Convencion Nacional de Presbiteros (CNP) in Ecuador, Sacerdotes Mineros in Bolivia, and Sacerdotes para el Pueblo in Mexico, among others. However, The Argentine manifestation of Third-Worldism within the Catholic Church was closely tied to the specific circumstances and atmosphere in Argentina during the 1960s and 1970s. It was a product of the revolutionary and rebellious spirit of the youth of that era. As an illustration of the intensity of these sentiments, in 1967 the “Comando Camilo

Torres” related to the magazine *Cristianismo y Revolucion* (1966–1971) burst into a mass presided over by Cardinal Caggiano with leaflets supporting the “revolution,” the “armed combat” and against the alleged “union bureaucracy.” In October 1967, Hector Botan, Miguel Ramondetti, and Rodolfo Ricciardelli, priests of the parish of Encarnacion del Señor in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Chacarita, translated and distributed a copy of the “Manifiesto de los 18 obispos del Tercer Mundo.” The message, addressed to the people of the Third World, exhorted them to disrupt their dependence situation to become the architects of their liberation. In addition to committing themselves to the path opened by the Second Vatican and the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967), the Third-World priests exhorted the Argentine bishops to assume this “new spirit.” This laid the foundations for a new collection of signatures for the elaboration of a “Carta a los obispos de Medellin,” signed by 431 Argentinean priests and more than 500 Latin Americans from Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Uruguay, Peru, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Ecuador, in which it denounced the violence, injustice, and oppression in Latin America. It also urged the bishops not to confuse (original) “structural violence” with the (legitimate response) “violence of the oppressed.” Nevertheless, the MSTM was built not only on a series of experiences related to the conciliar majority born within the framework of Second Vatican, such as the priestly meetings held in Quilmes in 1965, in Chapadmalal in 1966 and in the Jesuits’ San Miguel house in 1967 but also in the light of the networks of Catholic associationism before the conciliar event, such as the JOC or the priestly group Santa Amelia in Buenos Aires, in which the renowned Carlos Mugica was a prominent member. Some dioceses became places of articulation where priests started study groups, biblical weeks, and theological and pastoral discussion teams. Jose Pablo Martin estimated that the Third World “absorbed in its evolution some of these forms, influenced the eclipse of others, and unexpectedly boosted latent energies in the Argentinean clergy.” It is possible to think that the birth of a priestly group also responded to the immediate political situation, since they denounced not only the complicity between the Catholic hierarchy and the authorities of the dictatorship named “Revolución Argentina” but also the growth of poverty, the underdevelopment of the communities in the provinces, and the prolonged proscription of Peronism in the public arena. The MSTM and other similar movements reflected the diverse and dynamic nature of Catholic activism during this transformative period in Latin America, marked by theological reevaluation, social engagement, and political activism.

The period before, during, and after the Second Vatican was marked by not only the emergence of reformist and progressive currents like Third-Worldism within the Catholic Church but also by the radicalization of traditionalist identities. Traditionalism had a strong presence in various sectors of society, including the Armed Forces in Argentina (Scirica, 2014). Thus, the groups “Cit  Catholique” and “Tradition, Family and Property” and their respective publications *Verbo* and *Cruzada*, were joined by the publication *Roma* and the “Una Voce” movement (Ruderer 2020). In general terms, they shared their objection to democracy — the State should be structured based on an aristocratic hierarchy that cultivates Catholic values — and to Third-Worldist currents. The strength of Argentine traditionalism can also be understood as part of a universe of international anti-conciliar interpretations from groups such as *Opus sacerdotale*,

Credo, and *Silenziosi della Chiesa*. In their most radicalized versions, which can be found in *Contrereforme catholique au XXe siecle* by Abbe Georges de Nantes, *Cahiers de Cassiaciacum* by the Dominicans, *Liga katholischer Traditionalisten* by Elisabeth Gerstner and *Fortes in fide* by Noel Barbara, they came to maintain that the betrayal of tradition resulted in a vacant see. From a series of intellectual references such as Julio Meinvielle, Alberto García Vieyra, Plinio Correa de Oliveira, Jean Ousset, and Fabio Vidigal Xavier da Silveira, the traditionalists denounced that the Second Vatican was trying to replace the Pope as the highest authority of the Catholic Church. The accusations identified a network of infiltration stimulated by communism that aimed to destroy the Catholic Church, since it was the last moral bastion of Western society and, without it, it would be easier to destroy the founding values and morals of Argentine society. Despite their deep skepticism and criticisms of the local and Vatican hierarchies for what they viewed as a lack of vigilance in condemning doctrinal errors and abuses following Second Vatican, the traditionalists still held on to the belief in the authority of these institutions as true representatives or guarantors of religious and institutional continuity. The questioning of authority within the Church after Second Vatican created a complex and paradoxical situation for Argentine anti-conciliarism. Traditionalists grappled with what they perceived as an infiltration of perceived disordered tendencies within the Church while maintaining a commitment to the religious and institutional structures that they believed were crucial to preserving the ideal of medieval Christianity. The period was marked by intense theological and ideological debates, with different factions within the Church articulating their visions for the future direction of Catholicism in Argentina and the wider world. However, there were various agents, including religious orders such as the Salesians, Benedictines, and Jesuits, as well as intellectuals associated with the University of Salvador and the Argentine Catholic University, who advocated for a moderate reform aimed at modernizing the Church without inciting a social revolution or a return to tradition.

Coups, Democracies, and Reconciliation

The de facto government of the “Revolución Libertadora” found itself not only with hierarchies willing to assert its renewed legitimacy but also with other Catholic agents who would begin to question the political arrangements and the alliance between the cross and the sword. Within the Catholic hierarchy, the political landscape did not appear to undergo significant turbulence. However, within the broader Catholic community, there were shifts in perspective. Unlike the stark anti-Peronist stance that had characterized the Church during the 1954–1955 period, subsequent decades saw a diversification of interpretations of Peronism. Many began to revisit and reevaluate aspects of the Peronist government, including the role of Eva Duarte through her social foundation. Peronism transformed from being the primary political-religious antagonist to a more nuanced and complex subject of analysis. During this period, the developmentalist paradigm also influenced Catholic perspectives. As Argentina entered the Cold War era, with Peronism proscribed and democracy weakened, the Catholic Church sought to adapt to this changing context.

The first elections after the coup d'état against Peron were held in 1958 and the clear front-runner was Arturo Frondizi, who had created the Union Cívica Radical Intransigente (UCRI) as a detachment of the historic Union Cívica Radical (UCR). Through a political pact with Peron, a tolerant policy against Peronist unions and a developmentalist platform, he finally assumed the presidency. Beyond the suspicions that the most conservative sensibilities would keep on Frondizi as a covert communist, most of the Catholic Church and Catholicism agreed with the exhortation to overcome old political antagonisms and to integrate the Peronist electorate, but not Peron. During this period, the Catholic Church was especially interested in being able to build an autonomous educational system because Catholicizing public education had shown its drawbacks (Zanca, 2006). During Peronism, religious instruction had been reinstated in elementary schools, but the bishops had not been able to control the content or decide on the general administration of schools. Therefore, the Catholic Church began to project a *milieu* of its own rather than advance on society, an implicit recognition of the lost ground. At the same time, the Argentine government would begin to negotiate diplomatically a concordat with the Vatican to leave behind the *Patronato Regio* and shape a more modern relationship between both institutions. In other words, beyond social conflicts and cultural changes, the Catholic hierarchy maintained during the second half of the twentieth century a constant negotiation with the Vatican to order the institutional relationship between the Catholic Church and the federal State.

The conventional narrative in religious historiography often suggests that the Catholic Church supported the recurrent military interventions in Argentina between 1955 and 1976. However, recent historical analyses have revealed a more complex picture, showing that within the religious community, there were diverse sensibilities and opinions regarding the country's political situation during this period. While some within the Catholic Church may have supported the military governments or authoritarian rule, there were others who advocated for the restoration of a republican democracy or even the initiation of a "social revolution," which might include the return of Juan Peron to power. The magazine *Criterio*, often seen as a moderate Catholic intellectual publication, represented those who promoted a slow and progressive "national reconciliation" as a path forward. However, it is important to note that this position was not necessarily the majority view within Argentine Catholicism. The economic crisis and the cyclical nature of political and social conflicts, characterized by periods of economic growth followed by downturns, led to increased social unrest during the 1960s. Various social protests, including strikes, affected the country's productivity. Archbishop Antonio Caggiano played a role in mediating labor conflicts during this time. For instance, he was involved in negotiations during the CGT's "Plan de Lucha" in the 1960s, where diverse strikes strongly affected the country's productivity and Caggiano was in charge of mediating labor conflicts in some of those circumstances. His intervention in the railway workers' strike is easily remembered. It is worth mentioning that the "Plan de Lucha" caused Catholics to take positions in favor and against, even challenging the official position of the hierarchy. Also, faced with the confrontation between two military groups called "blue" and "red" that disputed how to carry out the integration of Peronism, Caggiano returned from his journey to the Second Vatican to find a peace agreement between both fractions (Fabris and Mauro, 2020).

The years after the Second Vatican seemed to be marked by political and religious diagnoses that intertwined, overlapped, and confused with each other. The condemnations made by Third Worldist priests against the “Revolucion Argentina” — a coup d’état typical of the era of authoritarian bureaucratic states (O’Donnell, 1996) — contrasted with the presence of Caggiano or the Military Vicariate in official public events and the conspiracies about communist infiltration denounced by traditionalists. Therefore, it could be pointed out that the time window between 1966 and 1976 was characterized by the fact that intra-Catholic disputes began to be publicly exposed with open challenges to Caggiano’s authority and, at some point, political compromises absorbed religious identities. The Catholic hierarchy sought to control the effervescence by altering the curricula in different seminaries and obstructing innovative pastoral experiences such as the worker priests. Along these lines, the Catholic crisis could be understood as a moment in which the public denunciations of Third World priests against the oppression of the dictatorship — and more broadly of capitalism — coexisted with the urban guerrillas such as Montoneros who reasserted their religious affiliation, the call to order of the religious hierarchies and the accusations of the traditionalists against the Theology of Liberation and communism. All of them claimed to hold the faithful Catholic representations. Nevertheless, there were voices advocating for social democracy and a more horizontal and egalitarian Church such as the intellectuals in the magazine *Criterio* or different orders such as the Jesuits, the Benedictines, or the Salesians. In other words: there were voices advocating for a moderate renewal, but their public influence seemed to have been overshadowed by the stridency of more extreme positions.

After the withdrawal of the “Revolución Argentina,” the definitive return of Peron to Argentina in 1973 implied a relative consensus among bishops, priests, and lay people as the political alternative to conduit and guarantee some sort of institutional agreements to carry out a democratic and popular government (Fabris and Pattin, 2021). This demonstrates that Catholicism was not a wholly anti-democratic actor. Ultimately, the consensus around Peron as the best option stemmed from the dangers posed by the violence between urban and rural guerrillas and the military forces in a context where the legal boundaries of repression extended even against the rule of law. After his death, however, intra-Peronist conflicts became more acute where left and right continued to fight over the destiny of the country in blood feuds. Broadly speaking, in the Catholic Church there were open calls for the coup d’état, urgings for national reconciliation and moderate criticism of a possible military intervention. In this regard, the political alternatives were narrowing due to the instabilities — as a result of the political crisis resulting from the violence of the guerrillas and the economic difficulties — during the government of Martinez de Peron and the ever-present figure of Lopez Rega. In the Catholic’s discourses — like those of other social agents — an end of the cycle was represented where the coup d’état became the inevitable result of a passive consensus, resigned acceptance or enthusiastic support (Lvovich 2013). The political crisis in Argentina appeared intractable, and the subsequent dictatorship closed the chapter on the possibility of resolving the nation’s problems through its weakened democratic institutions and the rule of law.

Conclusions

In the preceding paragraphs, we have endeavored to navigate a complex period in Argentine history, with a specific focus on a controversial actor: the Catholic Church. In striving for a more comprehensive understanding of the Catholic Church, we have avoided oversimplification, recognizing that its role cannot be solely characterized as an alliance with power or an unwavering commitment to social revolution. During the post-Second Vatican period, a diversity of perspectives and opinions within the Argentine Catholic Church is evident. These perspectives range from traditionalist views to progressive voices advocating for social justice and liberation. The Church experienced internal tensions as these perspectives clashed and confronted each other. Evidence indicates that the Catholic effervescence was marked by a profound internal secularization, wherein hierarchies struggled to establish clear boundaries for legitimate interpretations of religious renewal. The Argentine bishops could no longer define the correct and proper Catholic representations and practices. It is worth noting that religion did not vanish from Argentine society during the modernization process; on the contrary, it remained a significant aspect of many identities. In this regard, the prominent theories of secularization have proven inadequate in explaining the latter half of the twentieth century in Argentina. Religion appears to have evolved into a more individual or group-oriented phenomenon, with reduced institutional influence. The efforts to constrain new interpretations indicate that ecclesiastical hierarchies acknowledged the challenges that emerged following the Second Vatican. Yet, Argentine bishops struggled to reconcile opposing positions within the same religious community. In a short-term perspective, the Second Vatican, Medellin, and San Miguel served as centrifugal events, further widening the gap between various sensibilities. However, they created the conditions necessary for, in the medium term, specifically from 1976 onwards, the Argentine bishops to engage in negotiation and establish a consensus on a set of shared convictions. These convictions would later find expression in a Theology of the People or a Theology of Culture that aligned well with the papacy of John Paul II. The diversity of ideological positions, political sensibilities, and religious representations within the Church underscores the inadequacy of directly associating the religious institution with an anti-democratic political culture. Politics and religion were intricately intertwined during this period. The Catholic Church played not only a spiritual but also a political role, influencing public opinion and government policies. Likewise, Argentine politics influenced the Catholic Church, leading to conflicts and challenges. The political crisis in Argentina, involving the alternation between military and democratic regimes, contributed to turmoil within the Catholic Church and the society at large.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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