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# María Soledad Catoggio

## ARGENTINE CATHOLICISM DURING THE LAST MILITARY DICTATORSHIP: UNRESOLVED TENSIONS AND TRAGIC OUTCOMES

*This paper analyzes the relationships between institutional discipline and state repression within the Catholic church in Argentina during the last military dictatorship. Rather than a natural continuity between both terms we find a series of tensions, firmly installed during the sixties and still unresolved at the beginning of the dictatorship, leading to dramatic resolutions. In fact, State terrorism did not appear out of thin air. On the contrary, it exacerbated tensions already existing in the Catholic world. During the decade before the last dictatorship, countless conflicts occurred between ecclesiastical Authorities, the military clergy, and members of the military forces, conflicts whose unresolved nature led to extreme solutions such as, on one hand, the military's attempt to define Catholic 'orthodoxy' and, on the other, the clergy's participation in the repressive machinery of the state. At the same time, the decade set the stage for a whole series of confrontations between ecclesiastical authorities and their own clergy members to define conciliar 'renewal'. These confrontations coexisted with propagandistic accusations of 'subversion' and 'infiltration' in the Catholic institution. At the beginning of the 1970s, these accusations gave way to repression.*

*The unresolved tension between institutional discipline and state repression which started in the previous decade eroded the corporative solidarity and enabled vertical and horizontal ruptures within the church. This had tragic consequences during the last dictatorship, which occurred in circumstances that, rather than following a recurrent pattern, were the result of a variety of situations that were unpredictable for the actors.*

The theory of 'two churches', one *complicit* and the other *persecuted*, has long been seen as the key to reading the relationships of the ecclesiastical institution with the military government, at times preventing a deeper understanding of the problem. In fact, the last military dictatorship gave rise to a range of scenarios. It was possible, though polemical, for military groups to appoint themselves guardians of the 'Catholic orthodoxy', and even to eventually condemn an edition of the Bible, accusing it of being 'leftist and subversive'. At the other extreme, the armed Montoneros organization sought to bring legitimacy to their cause by striking up correspondence with Pope John Paul II. For this purpose, they elected their own chaplain as emissary, the priest Jorge Adur, who was later tragically kidnapped and disappeared. At the same time, it struck many as disconcerting that a figurehead of Catholic nationalism, Leonardo Castellani, would sit at a table with General Videla to plead for the life of his former disciple, the disappeared Haroldo Conti. It was no less disconcerting when

emblematic figures of conciliar renewal, such as Bishop Antonio Quarracino, came to denounce colleagues who had opted for a 'Marxist solution'.

In addressing this variety of situations, Emile Poulat stated that 'Catholicism is a world', managing to condense into a common-sense phrase the sociological density of the object of study. Even so, though it is 'a world', Argentine Catholicism is no less 'the world' to those who are socialized within it.

State terrorism was not engineered in a vacuum, but rather exacerbated – to the limit – tensions already existing in the Catholic world. During the decade before the last dictatorship, countless conflicts occurred between ecclesiastical authorities, the military clergy, and members of the military, conflicts whose unresolved nature led to extreme solutions such as, on one hand, the military's attempt to define Catholic 'orthodoxy' and, on the other, the clergy's participation in the repressive machinery of the state. At the same time, the decade set the stage for a whole series of confrontations between ecclesiastical authorities and their own clergy members to define conciliar 'renewal'. These confrontations coexisted with propagandistic accusations of 'subversion' and 'infiltration' in the Catholic institution. At the start of the 1970s, these accusations gave way to repression. These situations brought to the fore several unresolved tensions that allow us to understand – at least in part – the later exacerbation of state repression among Catholic ranks.

### **The 1960s: renewal, confrontations and accusations**

The 1960s was a decade marked by the effervescence of conciliar renewal. The Second Vatican Council simultaneously proposed an ecclesiastical renewal and a change in Catholicism's relationship to modernity, but far from offering a plan of action, it set the stage for disputes over the content and reach of the changes. In that climate, the conflicts assumed political-religious characteristics during the development of Vatican II. This dispute brought with it a renegotiation of relationships of authority and obedience within the framework of a generational confrontation. In various dioceses groups of 'renouncing priests' emerged who openly opposed their bishops. Conversely, other clergymen, and even bishops with a strong public presence and polemical political participation, were dismissed from their positions on the orders of their superiors. At the same time, various intellectual endeavors that had arisen within Catholicism, proposing a rapprochement with Marxism or seeking to innovate in the doctrinal plan by adopting philosophical and historical positions indebted to modern sciences, were targets for ecclesiastical censure (Armada, Habberger and Mayol 1970). The Movement of Priests for the Third World took shape in the heat of these events, and its first public actions were marked by a high level of engagement with these disputes that so shook the Catholic world (Bresci 1994). At this point, the first accusations of subversion among the clergy began to arise.<sup>1</sup> The decade closed with Cardinal Juan Carlos Aramburo's express prohibition of the priests of the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires from participating in public acts or declarations of a political or social nature without his consent.

Thus, in the 1960s confrontations between clergy members and ecclesiastical and military authorities were already beginning to occur.<sup>2</sup> As we indicated above, conflicts with military authorities began to emerge, starting with the accusation of various priests as being 'subversive', and there were even some arrests among those who participated in

the worker-student protests in May 1969 known as the 'Cordobazo' (Verbitsky 2006: 35). Even so, during this time the transition from accusation to arrest of clergy members was fairly marginal and infrequent. In the face of more generalized ecclesiastical sanctions among their own ranks, the intelligence services and security forces seemed to favor surveillance and 'preventive cataloguing' among the ranks of the clergy, rather than immediately placing them into the 'subversive category' (Catoggio 2009).

### **'Clerical subversion' and military messianism: the proliferation of ecclesiastical arrests and sanctions**

As the decade of the seventies was beginning, arrests of priests for political reasons were becoming more frequent. Among the cases of greatest impact, we can mention two types here. The first kind refers to the arrest of priests who were accused because of links to 'subversion'. The second, on the other hand, openly obeyed 'conflicts of interests'.

Among the first kind of arrests, the common denominator was the publicity they attracted in the field of public opinion, as well as public statements of support from colleagues of detainees and the intervention of ecclesiastical authorities that effectively negotiated publicly with military functionaries for the freeing of their fellow clergy members. This role was performed even by bishops who were openly identified with counter-insurgent military discourse. At the same time, the experience in prison as 'Activist school' was valued by detained clergymen as a deepening of their commitment to the 'world of the poor'. Accordingly, these priests publicly rejected a corporative resolution to repression based on direct negotiation between ecclesiastical power and military power. Many of the actors who later became victims of State terrorism during the most recent military dictatorship had had these previous experiences of detention. On these occasions the arrests of priests were often followed by ecclesiastical sanctions; that is, the temporary withdrawal of ministerial licenses. This imposition of ecclesiastical sanctions aimed at institutional discipline expresses an unresolved tension that, with the advance of state repression against Catholicism, took on tragic contours in the period that followed.<sup>3</sup>

The second kind, which we have called 'conflict of interests' arrests, is inserted within the military and security structure. In general these were conflicts between prison chaplains and security forces that caused bishops' intervention. In these cases the double subordination of the chaplains, to both the police and ecclesiastical authorities, facilitated the confusion of roles and functions of authority. The prison authorities claimed the right to enact regulations and to sanction, with short periods of detention, those chaplains who in certain circumstances, echoing the demands of the prison population, refused to give religious assistance. So naturalized was the legitimization of religious practice in prisons that the security forces saw the withdrawal of this practice as a regulatory transgression that needed punishment.<sup>4</sup> This naturalization is understandable in light of the long tradition of interchange between military power and ecclesiastical power, built up in the heat of the military coups and which was institutionalized with the creation of the military vicariate in 1957. Throughout the decade this organization, which had national jurisdiction, gained autonomy from the ecclesiastical institution and authority within the military world, to the point that the military clergy acquired distinction due to its particular condition of holding

military rank along with ecclesiastic ministry. This was undoubtedly another source of tensions in the ecclesiastical institution. A series of jurisdictional conflicts then proliferated between diocesan bishops and military curates that highlighted the tensions of unresolved power relationships within the ecclesiastical authorities (Siwak 2004). By 1976, the Argentine military clergy had distinguished itself, with its 214 military chaplains, as the most imposing in Latin America (Ruderer 2010).

By the mid-1970s, the figure of the 'subversive cleric' had been socially established. This figure brought on a demystification of the religious world of Catholicism as it sowed the suspicion of 'infiltration' in the heart of the institution. Even before the coup such words were spoken as the harangue with which Lieutenant Colonel Juan Carlos Moreno brought in the new year of 1976:

The anti-patriotic guerrillas of Tucumán are not the only enemies of the Nation. Those who change or deform in their writings the verb 'to love' are also enemies; the ideologues in our universities who poison the souls of our young people and arm the hand that kills without reasoning and for no reason (...) *the evil priest who shows Christ with a gun in his hand; the Judases who fuel the guerrilla.* (cited in Vásquez 1985:15. Emphasis added).

The other face of this process was the sanctification of the repressive activity of the armed and security forces in alliance with Catholic sectors imbued with a military spirit. The theological-political justification of the so-called 'war on subversion' was strongly constructed around the figure of a 'just war'. This formulation, supported with authoritative quotations from Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Francisco de Vitoria, bestowed a transcendental meaning on repression.

### **Unresolved tension: tragic outcomes during the most recent military dictatorship**

This legitimizing role played by various sectors of Catholicism was not an innovation on the part of the authoritarian regime inaugurated in 1976, but rather a repeat of a function performed, with more or less variation, ever since the first military-civilian-religious coup of the 20th century, in 1930 (Mallimaci 1992). The 'political-praetorian system' established in the first decades of the 20th century, in which the interchange between civilian and military organizations was naturalized by a large majority of social and political actors (Quiroga 1994), established the conditions for the FFAA (Armed Forces of the Argentine Republic) to fulfil the role of the 'Catholic Party', endorsing a good part of the demands of the state apparatus as their own (Di Stéfano and Zanatta 2000: 432). What was new, though, was the great degree of involvement of certain sectors of the clergy with the legitimization of the so-called 'fight against subversion', and the exercise of repressive violence itself. A case in point regarding the clergy's participation in the repressive machinery is the priest and police chaplain of the province of Buenos Aires, Cristián von Wernich, who was recently sentenced for his crimes. Nevertheless, the accumulated complaints submitted at the beginning of the transition to democracy demonstrate a vaster number of suspects that have still not been tried (López Crespo 1984; Obregón 2005).

The exacerbation of military messianism brought on more than a few conflicts with ecclesiastic authorities. These tensions are expressed both in the doctrinal sphere and in practice. In the first, the desire to control Catholic 'orthodoxy' led them to condemn an edition of the Bible, called the *Biblia Latinoamericana* (Latin American Bible), accusing it of being 'leftist and subversive'. This sparked a controversy that lasted for months and that laid bare the intersecting alliances between bishops and the military. In spite of disagreements within the Church, it was necessary to 'close ranks' in the face of military interference. Similarly, in practice the military's suspicion of 'Marxist infiltration' among the ranks of the clergy, and the arrests and interrogation of clergy members, were based on the need to correct and/or punish what the soldiers understood as a faulty interpretation of Catholic doctrine (Catoggio 2013).

To this arrogation of armed forces and security forces, we can add the attempt by ecclesiastical authorities to discipline their own clergy members. As stated above, at the beginning of the 1970s arrests of clergy were frequently followed by ecclesiastical sanctions. Such were the cases, for example, of the priests Carlos Mugica, Hernán Benítez and Alberto Carbone. The sanctions consisted in those cases of canonical reprimands for 'imprudence' and/or the withdrawal of ministerial licenses for certain periods of time.<sup>5</sup>

This overlapping of church sanctions aimed at institutional discipline with the advance of state repression against these actors expresses an unresolved tension before the most recent dictatorship, which would assume tragic dimensions with the exacerbation of the repression in later years. In the first place, it gave way to situations of institutional decommissioning that were interpreted by some actors (and even some analysts of the phenomenon) as a 'green light' to the military to continue to repress their own clergy members. Conversely, in situations of repressive threat, the credentials issued by church authorities to act as a 'red light' to the security forces were ineffective. Finally, on occasion the tension seemed to resolve itself under the coordination between state repression and institutional discipline, acting as a 'means of protection' for the clergy members themselves, putting a limit on the repressive action.

### **Between decommissioning and institutional endorsement: the symbolic (in)effectiveness of credentials and the operational primacy of military rationality**

As an illustration of the first scenario mentioned above, we can turn to the kidnapping of the Jesuit priests Francisco Jalics and Orlando Yorio, which took place on 23 May 1976. Both priests, along with a group of eight catechists, were the target of a repressive operation carried out in a house in a slum neighborhood of Bajo Flores, where they were taking part in a mass (Mignone 1985).

Many of the attempts to clarify this case have revolved around the status of the priests within the institution at the moment of their detention. According to what has been reconstructed, at the time of the kidnapping the priests were decommissioned from the Society of Jesus. There are varying accounts of the conflict's origin. The most widely disseminated interpretation situates the conflict with the head of the congregation, at that time Jorge Bergoglio, regarding his disagreement over the social

commitment of the priests with the inhabitants of the slum (Verbitsky 2006: 71). According to this reconstruction the conflict with the priests exceeded the religious order's framework. The then-archbishop of the city of Buenos Aires, Juan Carlos Aramburu, had taken away the priests' ministerial licenses (Verbitsky 2005: 54). The perspective varies slightly with statements made by Jorge Bergoglio, then Provincial of the Society of Jesus, before Federal Oral Tribunal No. 5, in the 2010 case prosecuting crimes against humanity committed in the clandestine detention center at the Naval Mechanics School. According to his story the priests were the target of ideological accusations, like other clergy members who worked in the slums. The priests' exit from the Society, then, would have been a personal decision in response to the general order to dissolve the community they were in and to assign them to new posts. According to Bergoglio, they had authorization to say mass (using their licenses) until they were directed to a new diocese. The possibility still exists that the bishop of the archdiocese had denied them that faculty, although this source provides no evidence on the matter.

Both the statements given by Bergoglio and the testimony of a key informant, with whom we have held long conversations, allow for a reinterpretation of the conflict in other terms:

This group got together because of a shared interest, which was (...) the transformation of religious life from the point of view of prayer (...) When we went there we were all priests, we were deepening that spiritual line. Some of us taught at the university, others gave retreats, I worked with students (...) Orlando worked a lot in the slums, in addition to teaching at the university (...) And that's where we came into conflict with the Society (...) There was a moment when the authority of that time, which was (...) Bergoglio, told us 'ok, end this' (...) I think that, on one hand, he didn't want the groups to continue (...) he wanted to get rid of us and he gave each of us a new assignment, (Interview with a former Jesuit priest, 2009)

Beyond their particular details, both points of view foreground the institutional dimension of the confrontation. The story misinterprets the origin of the conflict, which was centered on the 'social commitment' of the priests with the slum dwellers, placing it on the level of relationships of obedience and authority. Repeatedly – recalling the categories of E. Troeltsch (1912) – when the clergy members' logic of action gains autonomy and its own legitimacy, exacerbating the *sect* dynamic, sooner or later, this autonomization calls into question the *Church's* monopoly on authority. At this point, those whose role it is to manage that monopoly on authority find themselves with the challenge of limiting that dynamic, reestablishing principles of identity that define their symbolic borders and safeguard for the whole the legitimacy of their resources of authority.

The conflict between the sect dynamic and the reproduction of the logic of the Church reached a point at which the priests' first move was to try to conserve the small group:

The notification came at the end of '75, and at the start of '76 [the ultimatum] came, just before the coup (...) First we looked for other solutions, we tried as a group to be accepted in other dioceses but we couldn't.



– You mean, you did not want to stop being Jesuits?

No, that didn't matter to us, what we didn't want was to put a stop to our work that united action and contemplation, the option for the poor and the diversity of work.

– But did you agree, for example, to be part of the secular clergy?

No, that was the second choice. *Our first choice was to form a Secular Institute (. . . ) where secular institute refers to a group of people who present themselves to a bishop and are accepted by that bishop as a religious movement.* (Interview with a former Jesuit priest, 2009. Emphasis added)

The kinds of institutional negotiations required to achieve that alternative, combined with the urgency of putting an end to the open conflict with their own authorities, convinced them to opt for a second choice, to move individually to the diocesan clergy. Of the three Jesuit priests who were in the same situation, only one was accepted, to the diocese of Morón under Raspanti's jurisdiction. In contrast, Jalics and Yorío remained in a situation of institutional uncertainty, possibly aggravated by the suspension of their ministerial licenses, and it was in those circumstances that they were kidnapped.<sup>6</sup>

According to Bergoglio's statements, Raspanti's refusal to accept all three priests can be interpreted in accordance with the same logic:

I know that Monsignor Raspanti accepted one of the three, I think that, ignoring what was said about one or the other, he didn't want to accept them as a group, only one. That's an interpretation of mine that I infer from conversations. (2010: 24)

However, the bifurcation of trajectories that shows the contrast between Jalics and Yorío being decommissioned from the Society of Jesus and Dourrón's successful move to the Morón diocese did not alter the conditions of possibility and plausibility that, despite everything, the three would share the same fate. Six months later, Dourrón was targeted by an operation carried out by the State Intelligence Secretary (SIDE), which raided and largely destroyed the rectory he shared with the priest José Piguillén. At the time, fortunately, he was not there.

The case shows that, operationally, security forces did not have need of ministerial suspension nor of institutionally decommissioning priests in order to include them in the catalogue of 'subversives' and/or target them for repressive operations. According to the facts, the military and security forces had gained the autonomy to apply their own criteria when the time came to judge and punish supposed 'clerical subversion'.

In spite of that, Jalics and Yorío's 'lack of institutional protection' had such a symbolic effect that other clerics, such as Roberto Killmeate or Enzo Giustozzi, would later interpret ecclesiastical sanctions as a 'warning' sign. In various situations, institutional decommissioning and/or suspension of ministerial licenses would become 'red lights' for people who perceived them as direct threats to their lives (Siwak 2000: 93; Verbitsky; 2006: 171).

The contrasting case of the priest Mauricio Silva, disappeared since his kidnapping on 14 June 1977, strengthens this argument. Between October 1976 and April 1977, a series of repressive operations took place that were focused in particular on the *Fraternidad del Evangelio* (Brotherhood of the Gospel) congregation. The kidnappings



of the priests Patricio Rice, Pablo Gazarri and Carlos Bustos brought about a visit from the head of the institution in Latin America, João Cara. On 6 June, Cara went to the nunciature with Mauricio Silva, the only priest of the congregation who still remained in the country. There, they were interviewed by the Nuncio's secretary, Kevin Mullen, who assured them that 'the military government had promised not to "touch" any more priests or members of religious orders (Vázquez 2007: 144). Likewise, he advised them to meet with the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Juan Carlos Aramburu. They complied on 7 June. The cardinal assured them that they could 'rest easy', that 'in the last assembly of the bishops, a general had come to visit to reassure them that the military government had nothing against priests or members of religious orders. Only that they were looking for a certain 'Chichio' (sic) – most likely alluding to the priest Juan José 'Chiche' Kratzer, of the same congregation – whom they had not been able to find' (Vázquez 2007: 144). Nevertheless, they sought to strengthen Silva's credentials for greater peace of mind: on Cara's request, Aramburu extended to Mauricio a *celebret* – the authorization to preach and hear confession – that he was carrying with him when he was kidnapped.

### Continuity between repression and institutional discipline

By contrast, in other cases the coordination between state repression and institutional discipline was manifest, although paradoxically the actors themselves interpreted this as a 'means of protection'. Such, for example, is the case of a priest who belonged to the diocese of San Nicolás, under the jurisdiction of Bishop Ponce de León. The priest in question related the conditions of his arrest in 1976:

I used to travel a lot with young people because I had a very strong group (...) and it seems that they either thought I was a messenger for the ERP [People's Revolutionary Army], because of my travels (...) Even the bishop himself told us, 'if an operation happens today, they're surely going to come looking for one of you'. They came looking for me, after going through everything for more than an hour at the parish house (...) We went, they put us in the cell (...) and that same night the bishop, Ponce de León, came to visit us. Then, he visited me first, they gave him a room to meet with us in, then:

'What are you all up to? It's a very difficult accusation, very serious for you all. What have you done?'

'My conscience is clear about what I have done: my work with the youth, the neighborhood, etcetera, my work'.

'But there are accusations, they've told me very serious things about you all'.

'I don't know what they are talking about'. (Interview with a priest from the diocese of San Nicolás 2008)

Both the previous warning and the insistence during the visit reinforce the image of a bishop who is active in confronting the repression of his clergy members; at the same time, they allow us to glimpse, in the same movement, the eagerness to discipline the same membership, echoing the military's suspicion of Marxist infiltration into the

clergy. These two dynamics converge to the point that the bishop was able to negotiate a regime of house arrest under his responsibility. In this way, he managed at the same time to place a clear limit on the intervention of agents of the repression in his territory, and to discipline his priests:

And then, Holy Week came and (...) Saint Amant, who was Lieutenant Colonel, told the bishop: 'Since Holy Week is coming, try to cover those priests' parishes'. Then the bishop told him, 'If there is a reason they are detained, then tell people why, let people know, but if there is no reason for their detention, as long as they don't come back no one goes to the parish'. After three days in prison, they took us both out, and I asked them, 'Where are you taking us?' 'You'll see'. We were placed in the see under Ponce's authority, as if we were in prison, for the people we *were* in prison...

– Ah, how many days?

Seven, ten in total (...) yes, later yes, we were under Executive Power for a long time after that ... when they let us out they told us, 'OK, you all can go; but you will be under certain limitations because you are under the National Executive Power' (PEN). (Interview with a priest of the diocesan clergy of San Nicolás, 2008)

The event is recorded among the papers of the intelligence services of the Intelligence Department of the Buenos Aires Police (DIPBA):<sup>7</sup>

27.3.76: detained in an anti-subversive operation carried out in General Rojo by military troops from Area 132 and conducted by Penal Unit 3. Placed under the order of P.E.N., and regained liberty on 9.6.76. By special request of the Bishop of San Nicolás – at the time – Monsignor Ponce de León, the mentioned arrest was carried out on the site of the bishopric. (Table 'DE', File Number 1672, folio [17] 197)

According to these same records, this coordinated action had precedents, which makes it a recurring pattern rather than an exceptional case:

PERGAMINO: Personnel of this service have learned that the priest ~~XXXXXXXX~~ has for several months been in charge of the '*SANTA TERESITA*' Chapel located in the *OTERO NEIGHBOURHOOD*, in the city of Pergamino, that the above-named was transferred directly to San Nicolás by resolution of the diocesan bishop Dr. Carlos H. Ponce de León. It was likewise learned that the aforementioned ~~XXXXXXXX~~, was given with this transfer by the ecclesiastical authorities his final opportunity, due to his active political and ideological actions of a subversive nature. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ will have sworn before the bishop himself to maintain himself entirely separate from any political or ideological activity, with which promise he will be rehabilitated with this transfer. (DSN. 4-8-70)

The unresolved tension between institutional discipline and state repression that came into being starting in the previous decade eroded the corporative solidarity and enabled vertical and horizontal ruptures within the ecclesiastical institution. That is,

the margin of arbitrariness widened enough to both establish alliances with military power that were useful to streamline the institution, using the ‘suspicion of subversion’ as a mechanism to select clergy and to resolve conflicts of authority and obedience, and to limit the ecclesiastical institution’s autonomy to put a sudden or decisive stop to military interference in its midst.

This had tragic consequences during the last military dictatorship, which occurred in circumstances that, rather than following a recurrent pattern, were the result of a variety of situations that were unpredictable for the actors. That is, the unresolved condition between institutional discipline and state repression was resolved in each case by decommissions, institutional endorsement, or coordination with the repressive apparatus. The results were equally varied: decommissioning was not a necessary requirement to fuel repressive action, nor did endorsement guarantee protection. Coordination, on the other hand, was the most successful strategy in protecting their own, but at the cost of legitimizing – to a certain extent – the ‘accusation of subversion’ made by the security forces.

### **Strategies, memories, and judgments: from dictatorship to democracy**

In the context of the hostility that framed the last military dictatorship, the nature of Argentine Catholicism – vertical, hierarchical and obedient to Rome – was itself seen by the actors as a containment structure. Faced with state repression among the ranks of the clergy, the recourse to ecclesiastical authority was a widespread measure, and among the first ones turned to when facing repressive action. It was even a habitual and immediate resort beyond the ideological sign of the episcopal superior and/or dignitary in question. It is not surprising then, that while harshly opposed in some areas, a Cursillo of Christianity participant and a Third-Worldist would forge an alliance with few conditions when the time came to devise survival strategies.

In contrast to previous years, when we found the same actors refusing this institutional mediation, the new repressive context imposed the need to turn to a ‘position of authority’ and its symbolic efficacy to appeal to other institutional authorities, such as the functionaries of the military government. This confidence in a bishop of the Catholic Church’s capacity for institutional interference allows us to see that, definitively, this was an appeal to an old strategy of integral Catholicism: the recourse to a *modus vivendi* based on a negotiation between religious (Catholic) power and military power, at the expense of finding a rational-legal procedure that was suitable to the administration of justice.

In general in these situations, bishops’ individual interventions consisted of letters and interviews with different functionaries of the military government and/or visits to the penitentiaries, in cases of arrest. The literature on the subject has emphasized the ‘private’ nature of this kind of intervention, putting in evidence the weakness of ‘secret’ negotiations to establish the structural conditions of a movement in opposition to the military regime.

More than eighty prelates in diocesan, military, or auxiliary roles make up the episcopal body. Only four adopted a line of open condemnation of the human rights violations committed by the terrorist regime: Enrique Angelelli, Bishop of La Rioja,

who was assassinated when the armed forces simulated a traffic accident on 4 August 1976; Jaime de Nevares of Neuquén, and Miguel Hesayne of Viedma, who were members of the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights; and Jorge Novak of Quilmes (...) who is part of the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (MEDH) (...) Without taking a public stance, *other bishops took in victims and took steps in private to help them, always without success.* (Mignone 1986: 44. Emphasis added)

At this point in our investigation it is undeniable that there was no active denunciation of human rights violations, and that the bishops were well aware of these. Nevertheless, it is necessary to evaluate more carefully the kind of steps taken by ecclesiastical authorities as individuals, as well as the reach and effectiveness that they had at the specific time.

On one hand we find individual interventions that invoked all their institutional weight, bringing to bear their role of authority as bishops of the Catholic church, which were successful in getting their clergy members out of the repressive circuit. Furthermore, we see how those bishops identified as taking stances of public denunciation during the early 1970s later reversed their strategies, adopting private channels as the repression worsened among their own ranks.<sup>8</sup> Finally, we find public interventions that were unsuccessful at saving lives. The comparative analysis of interventions in light of the heterogeneity of the results obtained allows us to discuss some suppositions that have long been in place regarding the phenomenon.

Among the cases of individual interventions that were successfully resolved, we can mention those of priests Juan José Czerepack, Aníbal Coerezza and Omar Dinelli, who were detained under PEN and freed in large part thanks to the intervention of their bishops: Jorge Keremer, Antonio Aguirre and Manuel Marengo,<sup>9</sup> respectively. These cases, in spite of the non-public nature of the interventions, cannot be directly classified as private exertions of religious power, given that each prelate was invested with the political-religious authority conferred by his institutional role. Consequently, these encounters were not merely undertaken personally, but rather in the role of bishops of the Catholic Church who, with all the weight of their institutional seal, could appeal to the functionaries of the security forces and/or of the military government with a specific petition for the detainees.

By contrast, those 'public denouncements' of the repression of clergy members did not always guarantee successful results. The Bishops of Neuquén, Jaime de Nevares, of Viedma, Miguel Hesayne, of La Rioja, Enrique Angelelli, and of San Nicolás, Carlos Ponce de León, are four examples who used a strategy of open and public confrontation of local powers, which led to varying results. In the case of the Bishops De Nevares and Angelelli, they gained visibility for their public confrontations with military power held in the lead-up to the dictatorship.<sup>10</sup> Even so, both tended to abandon their public positions at the start of the military dictatorship, particularly to make demands in individual cases of clergy who were victims of state repression. In the case of Ponce de León, as we have seen he did not merely adopt the tactic of personal interventions: such interventions sometimes involved coordination between institutional discipline and state repression. Finally, even in the exceptional cases when some bishops continued to confront the repression of Catholicism with 'denunciation' during the last dictatorship, this did not necessarily translate into a positive resolution of the cases in question. Such was the case, for example, of the

institutional endorsement given by the Bishop of Viedma, Miguel Hesayne, to the letter from the families of the disappeared that interpellated the military government regarding those disappeared from the Church of Santa Cruz, among them the French nuns Alice Domon and Leonié Duquet.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of this evidence, these bishops' strength on the public stage during the years leading up to the dictatorship remained ingrained in the memory of the actors in the field, who, during the transition to democracy, led the active denunciations against their priests. Such was the role played by people such as Emilio Mignone, projecting this memory as a continuous pattern throughout the period.

In turn, the case of Bishop Jorge Novak, among those who were 'openly denounced' because of his leadership of the MEDH, is actually an example of this tension between the public and the private. As some works specifically aimed at analyzing his case indicate:

We cannot find a single diocesan written document that speaks in favour of the disappeared detainees until 1979; while the aforementioned Bishop had been president of the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (founded in March of 1976) and numerous family members of detainees-disappeared turned to his curia in search of encouragement and hope (. . . .) It seems he provided more of a space 'for the victims' rather than a space that 'mobilized consciences'. (Mallimaci 1997: 301–303)

In accordance with the bishop's own pronouncements about his course of action, Novak found in his 'individual path', intentionally uncoupling his actions in the field of human rights from his presbytery, the way for the authorities to 'let him be' (Ripa and Fort 1996: 133–134).

Thus, the continuity of a line of public denunciations sustained by the so-called 'four musketeers' of the Argentine clergy is more of a memory effect constructed around these actors' visibility in previous years than a concrete, continuous pattern.

Just as inexact are the generalizations that tended to underestimate any kind of personal measures undertaken by bishops and/or superiors in the church hierarchy. As we have seen in the case of the bishops, prelates such as Kemerer, Aguirre and Marengo, among others, managed to bring about the freedom of their own clergy members, and even that of other actors who turned to them through private channels. This, of course, does not mean that all private measures were successful, but it calls into question some memory effects that were installed early on during the transition to democracy, when the predominant need was to construct a collective space for open denunciation and of ethical complaints for the victims.

Narratives like Mignone's arose at the beginning of the democratic transition to confront the dominant discourse regarding subversion. In this context, the so-called 'theory of the two demons' took shape, which held the military powers and the guerrilla organizations equally responsible, while throwing a mantle of innocence over the rest of the civil authorities that had formed part of the repressive network during the dictatorship. By contrast, today we are at a juncture at which a prominent member of the Catholic Church like Cristián von Wernich has been tried and sentenced for his crimes, while those clergy members who were victims of state repression are beginning to find justice. In this new context, versions of the past built upon imprecise rumors – the form of discourse that

prevailed during the military regime – give way to judicial testimony. This juncture, at least for social scientists, encourages us to abandon the tones of denunciation and/or homage, to open the way for socio-historical understandings of the past.

Translated by Megan McDowell

## Notes

- 1 We are referring here to the cases of Arturo Paoli, accused of subversion for carrying ‘communist literature’, later exiled to Venezuela, and Rubén Sánchez, accused by the governor of Tucumán of carrying out ‘subversive activities’. See Rice and Torres (2007) and Schkolnik (2007), respectively.
- 2 The point that we emphasize here tends to be overlooked in the literature on this phenomenon, and it is a key precedent to understand the continuity with processes that took place later. At the beginning of the 1970s, the increase in these tensions paved the way, for example, for military functionaries to openly interrupt a religious ceremony. Such was the case of a mass officiated by the priest Duilio Biancucci, which was interrupted by a retired frigate captain and naval lieutenant as Biancucci was preparing to read a letter that the priest Alberto Carbone had sent from prison. See ‘Incidente durante un sermón en un templo de Bahía Blanca’, *La Prensa*, 13/10/1970, and ‘Aclaraciones por el suceso en la catedral bahiense’, *La Nación*, October 14th, 1970. The priest Biancucci was the object of strict surveillance by the intelligence services. Under these circumstances, he chose exile.
- 3 Some good examples of this first type include the detention of the priest Alberto Carbone on 8 July 1970, accused of the crime of ‘concealment’ in connection with the kidnapping of Gen. Pedro E. Aramburu; the imprisonment of the priests Hernán Benítez and Carlos Mugica on 14 September 1970, guilty of ‘defending criminals’ because of their ‘expressions of praise’ given at the funeral of the leaders of the armed Montoneros organization, Fernando Abal Medina and Carlos Gustavo Ramus; the imprisonment in March 1972 of Rafael Yacuzzi, parish priest of the diocese of Santa Fe, who was accused of ‘involvement in extremist activities’; the joint detention of the priests of the city of Rosario, province of Santa Fe, Rubén Dri, Juan Carlos Arroyo, José María Ferrari, and Néstor García, along with the ex-priest Santiago MacGuire, all imprisoned in August 1972. Finally, the cases of the priests Antonio Gill and Enri Praolini, detained in the province of La Rioja on 27 August 1972, along with Carlos Illanes, member of the Peronist Youth, because of the discovery of supposed ‘subversive material’.
- 4 One good example of this type of case is that of the priest Rafael Piccardi, chaplain of the Regional Sur penitentiary, imprisoned on 21 July 1971, as part of the conflict started between Bishop Jaime De Navares and the authorities of the Penitentiary Service. During the same period, then-seminarian Rubén Capitano was expelled from the Penitentiary Service. Years later, during the last dictatorship, the priest Omar Dinelli, detained in the Sierra Chica prison where he had worked as a chaplain, aroused solidarity among the prisoners and jailers who ultimately decided to transfer him to a different penitentiary.
- 5 On this subject, see ‘Mugica y Benítez en Libertad’, *Crónica*, 22/07/1970, p. 4; ‘Dejan en libertad a los sacerdotes Benítez y Mugica’, *El Día*, 23/09/1970; and the

- Boletín Eclesiástico del Arzobispado de Buenos Aires, cited in 'Amonestación al sacerdote Alberto Carbone', NDA, in 'Movimiento de sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo (1968-1975)', Comisión Provincial por la Memoria, Área Centro de Documentación y Archivo, No. 9, 2009.
- 6 It was later clarified that they spent several days held at the Naval Mechanics School, and were later transferred to a house, located in Don Torcuato in the municipality of Tigre, province of Buenos Aires. Orlando Yorio was taken in by Bishop Jorge Novak, in the diocese of Quilmes; Francisco Jalics, on the other hand, left the country.
  - 7 On 30 April 1998, by Resolution number 9 of the Ministry of Justice and Security of the Province of Buenos Aires, the Intelligence Department of the Buenos Aires Province Police was dissolved. The building where the DIPBA had functioned was ceded to a Provincial Memory Commission according to provincial Law N. 12642 of the year 2000. This is a public, non-governmental, autonomous and self-governing organ created under law 12483 of the Buenos Aires Province Legislature on 13 August 2000. It is presided over by Nobel peace prizewinner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel and public prosecutor Hugo Cañón. Some sections are deleted from the transcribed documents under a privacy policy protecting documents considered 'sensitive and private' by the Provincial Memory Commission.
  - 8 This same preference for private channels was adopted by bishoprics characterized by open confrontation with military governments, such as the Chilean or Brazilian ones, during periods of bloody repression of their ranks. For the former, see Cruz (2004: 10), and for the latter, see Serbin (2001: 83).
  - 9 Bishop Marengo is also recognized for his intervention, along with Bishops Vicente Zazpe and Jorge Casaretto, in the cases of priests Raúl Troncoso and Elías Musse, both held for long periods under PEN during the last military dictatorship. Regarding Marengo's work in Unit 9 of La Plata, see Gasparini (2008).
  - 10 De Nevaes had a resounding confrontation with General Buasso regarding the raid of the 'Mamá Margarita' school-orphanage, which took place in December of 1975 and led to the joint detention of a priest, Antonio Mateos, and five of the institute's collaborators. It is interesting to note that the 'public denunciation', and the controversy surrounding it, took place after the detainees had been freed. The extensive public debate between the bishop and the general was unsuccessful in preventing similar events from happening, or in procuring a public gesture of submission from General Buasso; it did, however, bring about a change in the prelate's strategy. In January 1977, after a raid on a convent in the city of Cutral C6, De Nevaes set about on a new confrontation of military power, this time embodied in the figure of General Sexton. In this case, he took an epistolary tack. Analogously, the strategies of public disapproval implemented by Bishop Angelelli in the early 1970s, in the cases of detained priests Antonio Gill and Enri Praolini, contrast with the individual measures the Bishop used with various figures of military power as the repression of his clergy members increased (Baronetto 1996).
  - 11 'Carta de familiares de desaparecidos', 19/12/1977, cited in Hesayne (1989).

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