A Vanguard for the Counterrevolution: "Catholic Action" and the Transnational Project of *La Ciudad Católica* in Argentina, 1959-1976

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of La Ciudad Católica, an organization formed in 1959 by French and Argentine lay activists who coined and proposed a counterrevolutionary interpretation of Catholic social doctrine. Prompted by the rise of progressive Catholicism, Argentina's internal crises, and the global Cold War, Ciudad Católica advocated the formation of a counterrevolutionary vanguard and the grassroots mobilization of an "Army of God" to counter the threat of "revolutionary war" and build a new Christian state. While partaking in a transnational network of counterrevolutionary Catholicism, these activists provided theological justifications for "anti-subversive war" and the dismantling of the liberal state.

Keywords: Counterrevolution; Anti-Communism; Catholic action; Cold War; Argentina

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el impacto de La Ciudad Católica, la organización formada en 1959 por seglares católicos franceses y argentinos, quienes fraguaron y plantearon una interpretación contrarrevolucionaria de la doctrina social de la Iglesia. Ante el impacto del catolicismo progresista, las crisis políticas argentinas y la Guerra Fría global, La Ciudad Católica propuso formar una vanguardia contrarrevolucionaria y movilizar a las bases católicas como "Ejército de Dios" para contrarrestar la amenaza de "guerra revolucionaria" e instaurar un estado cristiano. Al tiempo que participaban

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en una red trasnacional de catolicismo contrarrevolucionario, estos activistas ofrecieron justificaciones teológicas para la "guerra antisubversiva" y el desmantelamiento del estado liberal.

Palabras clave: Contrarrevolución; Anticomunismo; Acción Católica; Guerra Fría; Argentina

The fall of Juan Domingo Perón in 1955 launched a period of crisis and transformation among the Argentine Right. For some, Perón had been the incarnation of the true leader capable of channeling working-class demands and guarantee stability under a modern corporatist state. For others, Perón had betrayed "the national revolution" by conceding to Communist infiltration and to the populist temptations of the postwar era. As protagonists in the Peronism/anti-Peronism divide, Catholic public intellectuals and activists were key actors in the disputes over the contours of the Catholic nation and in defining the parameters of "Catholic action" in response to modernity, liberalism, socialism, and the "social question." Argentine lay Catholics capitalized on the Vatican's exhortation to bolster Catholic involvement in politics, melding local conflicts with debates amid the clergy and laity for the creation of a Christian social order.

This article examines the ideology and platform of La Ciudad Católica (CC), an organization formed in 1959 by an ensemble of French émigrés and Argentine lay activists who understood Catholic action as the fulfillment of a counterrevolutionary mission. CC espoused a staunch anti-Marxist ethos, advocating for the education of counterrevolutionary vanguards and the decentralized mobilization of Catholics at the elite and grassroots level as the only effective means to counter the enemies of the Church and restore of the kingdom of Christ. These activists took part in a broader transnational network of counterrevolutionary Catholicism spanning Western Europe and the Americas, and served as a point of encounter between lay Catholic ideologues, the Argentine military establishment, and the private sector. Altogether, these actors aspired to give counterrevolutionary Catholic action a concrete expression, as they sought solutions to the perceived ills of Argentina and of Western Christianity more broadly.

The study of political Catholicism in postwar Argentina has reflected the political and historiographical dominance of both Peronism and the military, often circumscribing the focus on clerical and lay sectors of Catholicism to their relations to these two nodes of social and political power, and placing decidedly more emphasis on the upper echelons of the Argentine Church.[1] The historiography of Argentina's Cold War has equally stressed these ties between high clerics and the Armed Forces, particularly in the lead-up to the 1976 coup and the ensuing repression.[2] Conversely, other scholars have paid significant

attention to the impact of Liberation Theology in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution and the Second Vatican Council, locating debates surrounding the re-articulation of Catholic action mostly on the side of progressives.[3] A recent wave of scholarship has stressed the importance of reconstructing the contested landscapes of transnational Catholicism and the clashing interpretations and implementations of "Catholic action" in the face of the secularization of society at different moments. In this regard, Stephen Andes has noted the need to address the "multi-centered nature of Latin American Catholicism" and the active tensions between lay Catholics and the initiatives emanating from the Vatican.[4] Best embodied by the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), the Church's gamble in favor of lay Catholic activism as an effective instrument against secularization resulted in a "softening" of past intransigence toward addressing "the social question." However, the creation of the Azzione Cattolica Italiana (1905) was accompanied by a top-down strategy implemented by the Vatican to retain control over Catholic action organizations. Yet, as lay activists embraced an integralist approach to their mission of re-Christianization, their organizations took on a life of their own and became notable actors in the emergence of mass politics.[5]

For historian Miranda Lida, the plight of Argentine Catholics in confronting modernity forced them to "steep themselves in it," allowing their projects to be shaped by strong transnational currents and acquire a cosmopolitan imprint that merits further examination by historians.[6] As I analyze here, the trajectory of organizations such as CC force us to interrogate the ways in which Catholics envisioned their involvement in political affairs, the broader scope and contexts in which they acted, and the national and transnational bonds they created.[7] As historian Elena Scirica has noted in her groundbreaking work about this organization, La Ciudad Católica is representative of a constellation of groups that created and shared new cultural, educational, and political spaces of Catholic action.[8] Some of these spaces fostered the encounter between the French doctrine of counterinsurgency and Catholic integrism (as Mario Ranalletti has convincingly shown),[9] while others espoused a wider range of forms of Catholic socialization and deployed competing notions of Catholic action.[10] CC weathered the tensions between ecclesial authority and lay Catholic action, and served as an intellectual and organizational bridge between Argentine Catholic nationalists and a transnational counterrevolutionary project with concrete local implications. Given the historical tension between secularism and Catholic-infused notions of "Argentineness," and a robust presence of Catholic nationalists as public intellectuals, CC found fertile ground in Argentina, allowing its activists to envision a modern, Christian, and counterrevolutionary social order, shaped by the local "war against subversion" and the global Cold War.

Catholic action and the Peronist question

During the 1920s and 30s, conservative nationalists portrayed liberalism and leftist radicalism as "anti-national" forces at the root of Argentina's crises, and proposed a range of solutions to these ills, from fascist mobilization to authoritarian state corporatism and military dictatorship.[11] Animated by the Church's institutional call for Catholic action, lay Catholics participated in these debates in a variety of ways. Focused on the cultural and spiritual realms, the Catholic press strove to reach a wider working-class audience and blur the lines between Catholic popular culture and "the social question."[12] Through radio broadcasts and a myriad of publications, lay and clerical activists debated the nature of Catholics' involvement in social and political matters. Figures such as Gustavo Franceschi, Leonardo Castellani, Virgilio Filippo, and Julio Meinvielle, brought to the public sphere their project to "re-Christianize" Argentina, fight "the infection of liberalism," revive the "weak Catholicism" that predominated among *el pueblo católico*, and prepare the coming of "a new Middle Ages."[13]

This robust public culture was bolstered by the founding of the Cursos de Cultura Católica in 1922 and of Acción Católica Argentina (ACA) in 1931. Both became cornerstones in promoting lay organizations in local parishes, schools, military institutions, universities, factories, and neighborhood associations.[14] Fathers Antonio Caggiano, Froilán Ferrera, and Silvino Martínez are credited with conceiving the ACA as an instrument to extend Catholicism beyond the private confines of the soul and the temple, foster an active engagement with society, and a concern for earthly matters.[15] As stated by Caggiano himself, the ACA was to function as an organic entity to coordinate "all organized Catholic forces toward an external social apostolate," while placing the power to steer these forces in the hands of the Church hierarchy.[16]

The ACA was a resounding success: between 1934 and 1943, the number of its affiliates grew from 25,000 to almost 100,000, becoming a platform for Catholics to act and speak publicly even if often constrained by the authority of the archbishop in Buenos Aires. "Catholic opinion" was no longer the monopoly of the high clergy, and the ACA's rich associational life palpably modified the very ways through which Catholics engaged with social and political issues.[17] As Humberto Cucchetti has pointed out for this context, *el ser católico* implied an ethos of conquest, of *catolización* of public space, and of crafting new forms of militancy and belonging.[18]

While initially cautious about Catholic collaboration with the military regime that rose to power in 1943, Caggiano—who, by then, had been promoted and named Bishop of Rosario—saw an opportunity for Catholics to "translate our beliefs into action" and play a central role in social reform.[19] The ACA

followed suit by leading the "re-Christianization" of the education system, and providing the new government with cadres for its administrative and governmental apparatus. Along with Catholic presence in civic events, festivities, and commemorations, this collaboration sealed the Church-military alliance to restore order and hierarchy in society.[20]

The rise of Perón to the presidency in 1946 prompted Catholic civic and labor organizations to fuse Catholic and working-class identities to back the continuation of an "authentic" Catholic nationalist project.[21] Yet, Perón's closeness to the labor movement garnered the hostility of anti-Peronist Catholics, such as Fr. Julio Meinvielle, who had supported the re-Christianization efforts. Like other anti-Peronists, Meinvielle saw Perón's class-based rhetoric as a dangerous "materialist turn" in Argentine nationalism, and as the result of Communist-Masonic infiltration in Perón's coalition.[22] The challenge was, in turn, to restore nationalism as a "universal conception of Christian values" and to redirect it toward a "true sense of social justice" and the restoration of Christ's kingdom on Earth.[23]

In June of 1955, a military coup removed Perón from power, with the support of a broad coalition of students, Catholics, nationalist intellectuals, and the Radical and Socialist parties. The "de-Peronization" efforts of this so-called "Liberating Revolution" provided an opportunity for Catholic nationalists, including business organizations, to reclaim the social doctrine of the Church and vindicate the project of a Christian corporatist state.[24] Radical anti-Peronists, such as theologian Jordán Genta, advocated a deeper "cleansing" of Perón's legacy. An ideologue for the 1943 Junta, Genta cultivated close ties with nationalist officers through a series of lectures at the Círculo Militar starting in the early 1940s, and as an agent of "re-Christianization" in his duties as rector of the Universidad del Litoral.[25] From the ultra-nationalist publication *Combate*, Genta demanded that the new regime do away with the enemies of the nation (liberalism, Peronism, and Communism), abolish the 1949 Constitution, and implement a "revolutionary anti-Peronism," commanded by the Church and the military.[26] Genta saw the Armed Forces as the only body with a true "political nature," subordinated to "the supreme *caudillo*" (God), and endowed with the responsibility of acting when the civilian order was incapable of dealing with threats.[27] For him, the military's "immaculate sword" ought to inflict suffering and death "to serve Justice."[28] By the early 1960s, Genta became the main Argentine theorist of "revolutionary war" and remained an influential figure, particularly among Catholic-nationalist officers of the Air Force Academy in Córdoba, promoting the education of the soldier-warrior and the project of a "natural" Christian state.[29] Genta's militaristic nationalism had at its core the idea of counterrevolution as a sacred and violent enterprise, an idea that linked

him and other local actors to broader transnational currents of Catholic counterrevolutionary thought and action.

La Ciudad Católica and the transnational counterrevolution

Created in 1959 by an ensemble of Argentine and French clerics and laymen, La Ciudad Católica (CC) embodied a specific interpretation of Catholic action shaped by a lengthy history of opposition to secularism and by the embrace of a counterrevolutionary ethos for the context of the Cold War. CC was a sister organization to Cité Catholique, founded in 1946 by Jean Masson and Jean Ousset, a former secretary to the leader of Action Française, Charles Maurras. Cité Catholique aimed to build counterrevolutionary elite cadres in charge of the re-Christianization of society, procuring a renovation of the Church's educational mission and civic duties, and "to remind (…) the French laity of today about the rights of God over our Homeland."[30] Cité Catholique sought to reframe the core idea of Catholic action (the restoration of Christ's kingship) toward a counterrevolutionary struggle against the "implacable" enemies of the Church: naturalism, liberalism, and Communism. For Jean Ousset, these forces were incarnations of "the Revolution," a satanic project driven by the hatred toward God, Jesus Christ, and the Church, and the source of moral and intellectual corruption and the destruction of the social order.[31]

For Ousset, traditionalist Catholics faced the problem of building an effective strategy beyond mere intellectual knowledge. Emphasizing the relation between theory and action and the need to act at all levels of society, Ousset found inspiration in Lenin's political writings, and considered himself a theorist of revolutionary war, asserting that his anti-Communism was rooted in the careful study of Communist dialectics from Hegel to Mao.[32] For Ousset, understanding how Marxists "use every possible means to further revolutionary action" could reveal the enemy's motivations and methods, hence pushing counterrevolutionaries to critically examine the soundness of their own doctrine and the values they espoused.[33] To understand Marxism meant treating it not as "a body of dogmas" but as "a method, a cast of mind, a way of looking at the world and of living in it."[34] Mirroring a core premise of counterinsurgency doctrine, Ousset thus considered Communist revolutionary war an object of serious inquiry from which counterrevolutionaries could draw strategic knowledge.

According to Ousset, counterrevolutionaries ought to avoid replicating revolutionary destruction, and instead aim for the reconstruction of social bonds, the restoration of "the natural health" of the "social organs" wrecked by Revolution and the totalitarianism of secularism and modernity.[35] Cité Catholi-

que would be the instrument to restore these bonds, by educating a "dispersed and yet linked" elite of men and women, "pure as doves in their intention" but "cunning as serpents."[36] This vanguard would use various "means of action," such as correspondence, books, journals, pamphlets, posters; speeches, sermons, lectures; radio or television broadcasts; records, music, cinema; and the direct exchange of ideas through links of friendship, conversations, interviews, meetings, and rallies.[37] Whether individual or collective, decentralized and autonomous Catholic action would lead to a unified coordination of "all the forces of sanity and order," bound by the loyalty to a single doctrine, a common approach to method and tactic, "and their very real comradeship in the service of truth."[38]

In the span of a decade, Ousset's counterrevolutionary project yielded results. In 1957, a congress of Cité Catholique in Poitiers, France, mustered the support of several French bishops and members of l'Action Catholique, while the newspaper *Le Monde* revealed the direct influence that Ousset was exerting on the French military, particularly on the officers responsible for "psychological warfare" and countersubversive operations in Algeria.[39] Between 1958 and 1961, Cité Catholique summoned dozens of foreign delegates to its gatherings in France and created chapters in Morocco, Spain, Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, and Argentina.[40] For Ousset this move was a tactical one, as "the struggle against subversion is doomed to failure if it is not better organized and conducted at a supranational level. Otherwise the Revolution will reign supreme."[41]

The emergence of CC in Argentina was the result of the affinities between Ousset's "supranational" project; the pluralization of local initiatives for Catholic action; and concerns about the threat of a Peronist/Communist revolutionary war in the aftermath of the 1955 coup. This convergence was facilitated by pre-existing links between local actors and Catholic-nationalist French émigrés who found refuge from legal prosecution in Argentina. Among them were members of the Action Française and Vichy collaborators—professionals, industrialists, and intellectuals as well as military chaplains whom, with the help of French clerics residing in Argentina, joined Catholic seminaries in various provinces.[42]

The Argentine CC emerged out of a broader ecosystem of Catholic activism, nourished by the accumulated intellectual and social capital of counterrevolutionary lay Catholicism, and by a network of activists, mentors, and recruiters that included local figures such as Fr. Julio Meinvielle. CC also had the endorsement of high-ranking military officers, such as Col. Juan Francisco Guevara, a participant in the 1955 coup, and a founding member of CC. Guevara was also the translator for an early Argentine edition of Ousset's *Marxism-Leninism* (1961), a devout reader of French communitarian theorist Jacques Marie de Mahieu (another émigré from Vichy), and a strong advocate for corporatist and communitarian social policies under the regime of Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía

(1966-1970). Through these contacts with the Catholic and military establishment, Fr. Georges Grasset, a former chaplain of the French Army and Ousset's representative in French Algeria, recruited CC's first "political cadre," which included Guevara; businessman Roberto Gorostiaga; the French industrialist and convicted war criminal Robert Pincemin; and the anti-Peronist intellectual Juan Carlos Goyeneche.[43] As documented by Scirica, CC's founding core sustained strong connections with the military and civilian spheres of government and the industrial and banking sectors.[44]

In October of 1960, CC organized the *Jornada de la Ciudad Católica*, with a one-day program of talks on Communism, Marxist thought, and cadre formation, delivered by Gorostiaga, Pincemin, Guevara, the philosopher Juan Casaubón, and Héctor Llambías, a former under-Secretary of Education for the 1943 junta.[45] The *Jornada* coincided with the First Inter-American Marian Congress in Buenos Aires, which was attended by members of CC and chronicled in the group's monthly bulletin *Verbo*. The Congress had a markedly anti-Communist theme endorsed by Antonio Caggiano, who as Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires stood as CC's highest-ranking ally. Caggiano issued a pastoral letter that evoked Pius XI's *Divini Redemptoris* in its condemnation of Communism as "intrinsically perverse"; its scorn for atheism; and the vindication of the role of Christian charity and the social doctrine in fighting Communism. [46] *Divini Redemptoris* and Caggiano's letter became key doctrinal texts for CC's understanding of the anti-Communist struggle as a concrete problem of how to connect Catholic doctrine and action.

In 1961, Jean Ousset's presence at the third *Jornadas* of CC solidified the group's bonds with its sister organization and with local and foreign supporters. Among them were Caggiano (who also penned the prologue for the Argentine edition of Ousset's *Marxism-Leninism*); various delegates from Catholic seminaries; a group of Uruguayan supporters; and Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, a former Catholic Action activist and founder of the Brazilian ultra-Catholic organization Tradição, Familia e Propriedade (TFP). Reportedly, the *Jornadas* were also attended by military officers, businessmen, educators, labor representatives, and professionals.[47] Ousset remained in Argentina for two weeks, delivering talks at various universities and at the Air Force Academy in Córdoba, where the theologian Jordán Genta was a professor.[48] By then, CC was no longer a mere transplant of Ousset's Cité Catholique. Rather, and perhaps following Ousset's goals, it became a semi-autonomous, decentralized organization molded by the initiatives of local actors who capitalized on the transnational contacts facilitated by the Jornadas and by the circulation of texts and ideas evinced by CC's monthly publication *Verbo*.

Verbo is revealing of CC's ideological goals and trajectory, and, to some extent, of the gradual development of its transnational networks. In its early years, *Verbo* dedicated considerable efforts to the dissemination of Ousset's oeuvre in Spanish. *Verbo* also reproduced papal encyclicals; articles published by the Spanish and French branches of Cité Catholique; and, although less frequently, reports about the ordeals of Catholics in other Latin American nations such as Guatemala or Mexico.[49] Besides these roles, *Verbo* was conceived primarily as "a working instrument" and a vehicle for "rigorous indoctrination" geared toward political struggle. In *Verbo*, CC's Argentine and foreign collaborators laid out their shared interpretation of the counterrevolution, and paid special attention to the concept of action, which the editors defined as a way of "experiencing and submitting ourselves to the Real, in order to teach us the concrete way to instill Catholic truth into the minds of men."[50] CC was to work as the "hinge" ("*la Bisagra"*) to bind Christian doctrine and the salvation of souls with the realm of political necessity and counterrevolutionary struggle.[51] Thus, the goal of CC was to operate in an intermediate terrain, what they called "the no man's land" between the spiritual and the temporal, and act as a bridge between *obra católica* (Catholic work) and *obra cívica* (civic work).

Verbo was also seen as a pedagogical tool to form leaders capable of reaching the elites and, at the same time, to work from the bottom up through small militant cells, in what *Verbo* called "diffusion through capillarity." Capillary action would allow the organization to avoid acting as a single, synchronized movement, and instead operate semi-autonomously while "respecting the spirit of the method" and "infiltrate more easily the essential ideas for a Christian social order."[52] This networked structure would be conjoined by a common doctrine and a common counterrevolutionary purpose, with each "working cell" adapting their "style" to "each place and every environment."[53] Capillary action was a means to both mirror and neutralize revolutionary "psychological warfare." CC would then function as an organic mediator for "well-trained and grounded networks" linking the nation with "the decisions and measures taken at the top."[54]

CC members theorized and contextualized the doctrine outlined by Ousset. For instance, *Verbo*'s editor in chief Roberto Gorostiaga referred to CC's work in the local context of the early 1960s as aiming to replicate the unity of liberal-Communist attacks against the Church, and create a "consensus of Catholic opinion that indisputably sets the terms in which current events and issues are assessed."[55] Like Ousset, he praised Lenin for devising a "theory for action"[56] and saw CC cadres as an "active minority" for the dissemination of an undisputed counterrevolutionary outlook. As good Christians and committed counterrevolutionaries, these cadres would be well versed on "how to combat

the crawling of the ancient serpent. They shall be men devout of the Virgin and the Holy Rosary, a weapon of incalculable efficacy that has delivered so many victories for Christianity."[57]

As a spiritual and political organization, CC significantly re-articulated the notion of Catholic action, deeming lay submission to clerical authority and the conduct of charity and social justice as insufficient for "restoring all things in Christ." They saw a need to innovate political action and infuse it with a Catholic ethos to counter the Revolution's "virulent universality" by means of a counterrevolution as a form of Catholic universalism "methodically adapted to the demands of the struggle."[58]

"Revolutionary war" and counterrevolutionary action

As part of its project for capillary Catholic action, in the early 1960s CC developed a range of public activities throughout Argentina beyond their *jornadas*, such as conferences, talks, publications, study groups, and spiritual retreats. In this process of local expansion, the active participation and ideological influence of Julio Meinvielle and his pupil Carlos Sacheri gave CC a sense of historical continuity with local nationalist and counterrevolutionary traditions that had a trajectory of dialogue and convergence with fellow travelers abroad. Informed by the global Cold War and the circulation of secular and religious doctrines of counterrevolution, La Ciudad Católica melded Catholic action with local interpretations (by Meinvielle, Genta, and others) of "revolutionary war" as the greatest threat to the implementation of a Christian social order.

The core of Meinvielle's oeuvre dealt with the themes that animated the emergence of CC: the indictment of modernity, secularization, liberalism, Judaism, Communism, and democracy. A biting commentator on Argentine political affairs, Meinvielle was not alien to the idea of counterrevolutionary action. Coinciding with the rise of CC and the publication of Genta's own doctrine of counterrevolution, in 1962 Meinvielle gave a series of public talks in which he suggested the connection between his proposed "national revolution," the restoration of the Catholic City, and counterrevolutionary violence. There, Meinvielle posed that the Catholic City was the only legitimate product of the modern world, and that a dictatorial "New Argentine State" could cure the maladies of modernity, by dissolving political parties, imposing censorship, intervening the educational system, and repressing the "deadly dialectics" put forward by Freemasonry and Communism.[59]

Revolutionary war was, according to Meinvielle, the cause of the defeat of the French Army in Algeria and, in the Argentine context, the preferred vehicle

for Communist infiltration under the moderate presidency of Arturo Frondizi (1958-1962), which came to an end besieged by military hardliners who rejected any sort of tolerance toward Peronism and the Left. For Meinvielle, the "Frondizist-Communist apparatus" was masquerading a Castro-Communist takeover, thus demanding the action of the Catholic-nationalist youth "in all realms (…) including that of armed struggle."[60] Throughout the 1950s and 60s, a group of Meinvielle's young followers created the neofascist Tacuara Nationalist Movement, which engaged in numerous acts of public violence, such as the bombing of synagogues and the assassination of Jewish and leftist students, justified as part of the necessary "total war" against their enemies.[61] Like Genta's endorsement of an anti-Peronist and anti-Marxist "cleansing" in 1955, Meinvielle's vision and the actions of Tacuara dovetailed with the Argentine state's efforts to curtail Peronist activity, which was perceived, especially by the Armed Forces, as a national-revolutionary fifth-column seeking the conditions for a Communist putsch.[62]

Besides Tacuara, Meinvielle cultivated another type of follower. One such follower was the neo-Thomist theologian Carlos Sacheri, who became the main intellectual figure for CC in the late 1960s. A member of Acción Católica Argentina since his teenage years, Sacheri saw himself as the repository of Meinvielle's teachings, referring to him as "an intellectual combatant," and vindicating his anti-Semitism, his warnings against Perón's "Marxist nationalism," and his attacks against Jacques Maritain's "Catholic neoliberalism."[63] As CC's most noted public speaker, Sacheri eventually became its chief intellectual and activist voice, linking a long line of Catholic-nationalist thought to his own trajectory as a member of Acción Católica, and to CC's transnational counterrevolutionary project. As Sacheri later recalled, CC appeared in Argentina as a response to the universal scope of the "anti-Christian Revolution," but also as the result of Argentina's historical process.[64] For him, the local mission of CC was to reconcile counterrevolutionary theory and practice and revive Argentina's original nationalist project to deliver "a natural and Christian order that the country demands at least since 1810."[65]

This formulation of CC's transhistorical mission converged with two important developments: the reforms proposed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the political instability resulting from the overthrow of Frondizi in 1962. By 1963, *Verbo* reflected on these circumstances, referring to Argentina's political crisis as a manifestation of the enemy's undeclared war, the so-called "communist revolutionary war."[66] From then on, *Verbo* dedicated considerable space to condemning Catholic *progresismo* and critiquing the incapacity of the state to respond to subversion, and also engaged in advertising, distributing, and reviewing international literature on Communism and revolutionary war.

Led by Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía, the coup of 1966 represented an authoritative move by the military to address the problem of instability, invigorate and sustain the ban on Peronism, and suppress the growing presence of the Left, particularly in higher education institutions. Under Onganía, CC briefly rose to prominence when Roberto Gorostiaga, then editor in chief of *Verbo*, was appointed Secretary of Community Assistance and Promotion, turning CC into an active ideological "broker" for Onganía's so-called "Argentine Revolution." After only a year, Gorostiaga abandoned the post, in a move perhaps indicative of CC's disillusion with what they perceived as Onganía's tepid approach to "re-Christianizing" Argentina. Shared by other sectors of the Argentine Right, this dissatisfaction posed a new crucible for CC's political outlook. Echoing earlier ideas by Genta and Meinvielle, CC saw the liberal-democratic state inherited by Onganía as a hindrance to respond to revolutionary forces, and proposed that the response to the emergence and proliferation of Castroist guerrillas be a continent-wide military action, the restoration of the Christian order, and the "everyday silent, capillary combat waged by the Church's social apostles."[67] These apostles were to emulate the Communists' dedication to cadre formation and their will to act out of fervor. "The one thing we can learn from the example of Marxist revolutionaries," Ousset had claimed, "is the need to emulate and be stimulated by the zeal of revolutionaries."[68]

From counterrevolutionary action to the "war against subversion"

As a node in a larger transnational network mobilizing against the threat of global "revolutionary war," in 1967 La Ciudad Católica articulated a response to the outspoken internationalist revolutionary spirit of the Tricontinental Conference and to what they called "the Argentine juncture" (the 1966 coup). Foreseeing a major Communist takeover, this juncture offered the possibility of redirecting CC's activism to prepare "the conditions for the resistance": the creation of an ethical, militant, anti-subversive state that was free from "mass demagoguery"; and, similar to Chilean *gremialismo*, the construction of a social order based on competition and the representation of interests through corporatist "intermediary bodies."[69] This resistance was, for *Verbo* contributor Miguel Ángel Iribarne, "a call for new forms of heroism" at a "time for martyrs."[70]

For Iribarne, Onganía had taken positive steps toward implementing a "state rooted in the norms of Christian Natural Law" but also replicated the futility of liberal appeals to legality to tackle subversion. Still, Iribarne favored the criminalization of subversion, noting the close link between the acts of "terrorists" and the spread of Marxism in universities and the media.[71] The

passing of the Law of Defense Against Communism (August 1967) caused a lukewarm reaction in CC. For the editors of *Verbo,* legal means were necessary but insufficient to combat subversion, as the defense against Marxism required an integral approach to "restoring the health of the social body and erasing the possibility of aggression."[72]

While defending anti-subversive authoritarian legality and the prominent repressive role of the military, CC's anti-subversive communitarianism paid special attention to the grassroots dimension of counterrevolution. Following the idea of capillary action, CC advocated for the revitalization of municipalities as basic units of social and political organization, and as the main sites of combat against revolutionary conditions. [73] By stressing the locality, CC sought to enable civic participation and to make interests and passions more concrete and thus less susceptible to "abstract and absolute ideologies." [74] The municipality was also the ideal sphere for Catholic action, where activist cells could procure the education of "social leaders," the dissemination of knowledge about forces subverting municipal life; and the creation of communal banks, schools, and hospitals.[75] This civic dimension of counterrevolutionary action meant that the restoration of a Christian social order and the fight against subversion were to take place "from the bottom up," moving from the local to the national community.

Delimiting these spheres of Catholic action in a context of "revolutionary war" also raised questions about the use of violence to confront subversion. The answer was provided by Georges Grasset, a key figure in the creation of CC, and a contributor to *Verbo* under the pseudonym Juan Octavio Lauze. For Grasset, violence could not be proscribed, for that would leave no possible response to the enemy's actions. He saw revolutionaries as devoid of references to real social injustices and their violence as lacking a sense of responsibility.[76] Grasset did value the secrecy of action against an established power, but questioned the "excessive secrecy" of revolutionary clandestine action because it obscured the ideas and intentions behind violent acts. Leftist violence was thus senseless and meaningless. Conversely, for Grasset, the principles of proportionality and retributive self-defense were key to waging a counterrevolutionary violence that was both just and necessary. Violence, he claimed, could be exerted "as mandated by God" (*como Dios manda*); that is, after a deep conversion to traditional Christian virtue, "a synthesis of vigor and softness, force and serenity, intransigence and compassion." Violence could be just, if exerted by the virtuous as a solution, a punishment, and a last resort against the acts of "*los violentos*."[77]

The instability of national and regional contexts pushed CC to stress the role of violence in building a Christian social order. The fierce repression of the civic uprisings in Córdoba (1969); the proliferation of Peronist and Leftist-revolutionary violence (including the killing of former president Gen. Pedro E.

Aramburu in 1970); and the ensuing fall of Onganía,[78] made the reflections on the justness and holiness of anti-subversive violence a central theme in *Verbo.* The election of Salvador Allende in Chile; the advances of the Left in Bolivia; and the actions of the Uruguayan Tupamaros were equally portrayed in *Verbo* as signs of "the gravity of the hour," while the electoral defeat of the Left in Uruguay in 1971, for instance, was seen as a sign that Communism could be stopped, even if, as *Verbo* warned, "the war is not over."[79]

Against the backdrop of this regional and national polarization, by the early 1970s a new editorial board accelerated *Verbo*'s process of Latin Americanization, by broadening its contacts with Catholic organizations and publications in Mexico, Chile, Uruguay, and Bolivia through the Agencia Informativa Católica Argentina (AICA), a news agency created by the Episcopal Conference in the wake of the 1955 coup. *Verbo* incorporated news briefings from AICA; articles from Mexican *sinarquista* publications such as *Integridad Mexicana* and *La Hoja de Combate*, the Spanish neo-fascist group Fuerza Nueva, and the Portugal-based news agency Aginter Presse, a façade for covert right-wing terrorism in Europe. Locally, and in addition to a wide range of public events, *Verbo* promoted its "civic book club," which held an extensive catalog featuring works by Ousset, Maurras, Genta, Meinvielle, and the clericofascist Leonardo Castellani, together with Mao and Che Guevara's manuals on guerrilla warfare, and various counterinsurgency manuals.

When Carlos Sacheri joined CC in the early 1960s to bolster its ideological project, the group had amplified its role as a point of transnational intellectual encounter, a bridge for two generations of integrist Catholics, and a node of collaboration between laymen and the military to combat "revolutionary war." According to Scirica, Sacheri's contacts with CC dated back to 1961, when Sacheri delivered talks at the Catholic University in Buenos Aires, and met Ousset during his visit, serving as his interpreter. In 1967, after completing his doctoral studies at Université Laval in Québec, Sacheri actively proselytized against the Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo (Movement of Priests for the Third World) and publicly condemned "Marxist infiltration in Catholic spaces" as well as the "Cordobazo" protests of 1969, demanding the prompt intervention of ecclesial authorities to halt the advance of Communism. Sacheri published extensively in *Verbo*, including fragments of *The Clandestine Church* (1970), a book-length, all-out attack on Catholic progressives and *tercermundismo* that became a must-read among integrist circles, including military officers. Sacheri also undertook a vigorous campaign of civic "education," and following the steps of Genta, promoted *Verbo*'s message through public talks for neighborhood associations, community centers, Catholic schools, and the press.[80]

Sacheri focused on denouncing *progresismo* as the main instrument for a "psychological war" within the Church.[81] For Sacheri, this was the result of the "dialectical environment" created by the "neomodernists" behind the Second Vatican Council. Like Genta before him, Sacheri acknowledged the centrality of education and the educational system as the key frontline in the battle between integrism and progressivism. Prompted by the global rebellion of the youth, this concern occupied much of Sacheri's writing throughout the Onganía regime, making him an influential observer on the climate of social change and moral panic that characterized the second half of the 1960s.[82]

Sacheri also built on Meinvielle, Genta, and Grasset's examinations of authority and resistance and favored an authoritarian solution to the perceived impasse between the weak liberal state and the violence of the revolutionaries. Like his intellectual forefathers, Sacheri saw the liberal-bourgeois state as legal but illegitimate due to its failure to achieve the common good, and hence making it susceptible to various forms of passive and active resistance, including those of counterrevolutionaries. Citing Meinvielle, Sacheri argued that rebellion was a legitimate means of "self-defense" in the case of an "unjust and grave aggression," and it was the duty of the rebels to act in true representation of the people.[83] Sacheri's implicit argument, shared by fellow travelers in CC and abroad, was that counterrevolutionary Catholic action was an act of just and legitimate rebellion, and that only a new revolt led by nationalist officers, inspired by a Christian doctrine of "resistance," and backed by the Church, could deliver the final blow to the liberal state and defeat the "psychopolitical" apparatus of subversion.

The return of Juan Perón to the presidency in 1973 (which was, in fact, celebrated by *Verbo*) and his sudden death while in office in 1974; the exacerbation of Leftist violence (including the assassination of both Jordán Genta and Carlos Sacheri by members of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo [Revolutionary People's Army]); and the harsh repression conducted by security forces, prompted *Verbo* to reiterate its willingness to assume responsibility for the organization of a vanguard of Christian laymen for the "resistance of the national community."[84] By the time of the 1976 coup, CC had incessantly called for authoritative intervention by the military, asserting the religious nature of "the ongoing war" and their own "transcendent struggle" against Marxist attempts to substitute justice for slavery.[85] Strengthened by its bonds to the junta, and its solid international connections throughout Europe and the Americas, CC joined the constellation of lay Catholic organizations that aligned themselves with the 1976 junta's synthesis of the Gospel and the Sword, lending a theological justification for state repression and carrying out their mission as creators of a new Christian social order.

Conclusion: La Ciudad Católica and the transnational "Revolution of the Right"

La Ciudad Católica has been often treated as a spawn of Jean Ousset's project, as a derivative, peripheral, and almost anecdotal expression of the ideological groundwork laid by the infamous French school of counterinsurgency, itself mistakenly seen as a ready-made doctrine for seamless global implementation.[86] As an underappreciated history of Catholic activism with local and transnational dimensions, the broader significance of CC rests on its radical reframing of Catholic action as both a remaking of the social order and a violent counterrevolution, though its interpretation of the doctrine of "revolutionary war," and its proposal for "capillary" grassroots mobilization to reorganize society according to Christian principles. CC embraced the premises of "revolutionary war" from early on, not as an import, but as a shared theologico-political language rooted in enduring battles against secularism and liberalism, and "updated" in the heat of decolonization and the Cold War. This language gave legibility to local and global realities of instability and uncertainty, and bound CC to other thinkers and activists of the counterrevolution in Argentina (including state actors) and beyond. Combined with an unorthodox reading of Leninism, their corporatist and communitarian imprint allowed them to merge an outlook of internal war with a project to reconstitute social bonds, to both advance the mission of re-Christianization and build up the social forces to "resist" the ostensibly imminent Communist takeover.

The trajectory of CC can also be interpreted as illustrative of the transformations within the global Catholic Right that took place between the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and the rise of the new "national security" regimes in the Southern Cone. As the Left debated its goals and methods and built networks of solidarity, activism, and revolutionary action,[87] the counterrevolutionaries in CC sought to mirror the enemy's commitment to a total, global revolutionary war to wage their own struggle. They saw a militant Catholic counterrevolution as the only path to creating a new order that, following the original mandate of Catholic action, would amount to the restoration "of all things in Christ."

The Argentine CC illustrates a process of transfer and translation, but also of adaptation and convergence based on elective affinities and common global ideological sources, involving the Catholic-nationalist tradition represented by Meinvielle and Genta; the counterrevolutionary outlook of Ousset and Grasset; counterinsurgency doctrines; and the new generation of theologian-activists exemplified by Sacheri. Thus, CC should be treated as the merger of a venture that was transnational in its origin (Cité Catholique) with already existing networks and bodies of knowledge among sectors of the Argentine Right (the

military, clerics, laity) many of whom were historically tied to the production and circulation of those ideas since the 1930s and 40s. CC was, in short, a transnational phenomenon—the product of converging counterrevolutionary visions and organizations that linked local Catholic activism with a radical project to solve the problem of instability and create a new Christian social order.

CC also made a palpable intervention in ongoing debates within Catholic circles about Argentina's perennial instability, and, as a point of convergence for Catholic activists, it remains an understudied source of right-wing critique to successive military regimes. The experiences of Catholic mobilization during the 1930s and 40s against liberal-secular norms and structures; the debates about the effectiveness of concrete forms of Catholic intervention and action; and the advent of the Cold War as a period of uncertainty and of latent civil war, converged in the success of lay Catholic initiatives such as, but not limited to, CC. For this group of Argentine laymen, using orthodoxy and tradition as instruments for a Catholic-nationalist counterrevolution was a conduit to establishing alliances beyond national borders, finding themselves compelled to redefine their relationship to their own doctrine, to rationalize violence in theological terms, and to rethink the scale, scope, and form of their counterrevolution.

Notes

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