



# THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND ARGENTINA'S DIRTY WAR

Gustavo Morello, SJ

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
AND ARGENTINA'S DIRTY WAR



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*To those who, in Latin America, were persecuted because  
of their faith. Never again*

*For Evangelina, Valeria, and Santiago*



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## P R E F A C E

Since the election of the first Latin American pope, Francis I, the role that the Catholic Church played in the 1970s in Argentina has been revisited. For critics, the Church did nothing to defend human rights and was even complicit with the dictators. For its part, the Church claims that the bishops didn't know what was really going on and tried to help when they could.

Obviously, interest in the pope's role in the "Dirty War" has increased. Father Jorge Bergoglio, SJ is occasionally mentioned in these pages, but this is not a book about him or his experience as Jesuit provincial in Argentina. The case I deal with is about other religious actors: a group of five seminarians and a priest of the La Salette congregation who were kidnapped, tortured, and released in 1976. Their torturers also claim to be Catholic. I expect the sociological analysis of this case will provide a better understanding of Catholicism in Argentina in the last decades of the twentieth century, which is the context whence Francis I came.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

ALN	Alianza Libertadora Nacionalista (Nationalist Liberator Alliance)
APDH	Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos (Permanent Assembly for Human Rights)
APM	Archivo Provincial de la Memoria (Provincial Memory Archive)
BAH	<i>Buenos Aires Herald</i> (English newspaper)
CBA	Córdoba
CEA	Conferencia Episcopal de Argentina (Argentine Bishops' Conference)
CELAM	Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Latin American Bishops' Conference)
CEFyT	Centro de Estudios Filosóficos y Teológicos (Center for Philosophical and Theological Studies)
CGT	Confederación General del Trabajo (General Work Confederation)
CIAS	Centro de Investigación y Acción Social (Center for Investigation and Social Action)
CIDH	Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights)
CLA	Comando Libertadores de América (Liberators of America Command)
CONADEP	National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons
COV	Centro de Orientación Vocacional (Career Center Orientation)

## ABBREVIATIONS

D2	Department of Intelligence of the Córdoba state police
DINA	Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia de Chile (Chilean National Intelligence Board)
DSN	Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional (National Security Doctrine)
ERP	Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army)
ESMA	Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy School of Mechanics)
EUDEBA	Editorial Universitaria de la Universidad de Buenos Aires (University of Buenos Aires Press)
f.	Testimony taken from annotations on my field journal, since the interviewee wanted to remain unknown and preferred not to have the interview tape-recorded
FAR	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (Revolutionary Armed Forces)
FFAA	Fuerzas Armadas (Armed Forces)
GS	Church's Encyclical letter <i>Gaudium et Spes</i>
HIJOS	Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Children for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence, an organization of children of the disappeared)
JEC	Juventud Estudiantil Católica (Catholic Student Youth [high school])
JOC	Juventud Obrera Católica (Catholic Youth Workers)
JUC	Juventud Universitaria Católica (Catholic University Youth)
LVI	<i>La Voz del Interior</i> , Córdoba's newspaper
MEDH	Movimiento Ecumenico por los Derechos Humanos (Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights)
MID	Movimiento de Integración y Desarrollo (Integration and Development Movement)
MSTM	Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo (Movement of Priests for the Third World)
OAS	Organization of American States

## ABBREVIATIONS

PEN	Poder Ejecutivo Nacional (National Executive Power)
PRN	Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (Process of National Reorganization, as the military regime called themselves)
SJ	Member of the Society of Jesus, Jesuit
SCJ	Member of the congregation “Priests of the Sacred Heart”
SM	Seminario Mayor (Major Seminary)
SPC	Servicio Penitenciario de Córdoba (Córdoba’s Penitentiary Service, garrison guards)
Triple A	Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine Anticomunist Alliance, paramilitary group)
UCC	Universidad Católica de Córdoba (Córdoba Catholic University)
UCR	Unión Cívica Radical (Radical Civil Union, which despite its name is a center political party)
UNC	Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (Córdoba National University)
USCC	U.S. Catholic Conference
UOM	Unión Obrera Metalúrgica (metalworkers’ union)
WOLA	Washington Office for Latin America





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## CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

Argentina, 1976. On the afternoon of August 3, Father James Weeks went to his room to take a nap while the five seminarians of the La Salette congregation living with him went to attend classes. Joan McCarthy, an American nun who was visiting them, stayed by the fireplace, knitting a scarf. They were to have dinner together and discuss the next mission in Jujuy, in northwestern Argentina, where McCarthy worked. Suddenly, a loud noise came from the door. Before McCarthy could reach it, a mob entered the house. About ten men claiming to be police spread out through the house, looking for weapons, guerrilla hideouts, and “subversive fighters.” When the seminarians returned from classes, they and Weeks were taken blindfolded to an unknown place. Alejandro Dausá, Alfredo Velarde, José Luis Destéfanis, Daniel García Carranza, and Humberto Pantoja were “disappeared” for a few days, then jailed and tortured for two months, and finally went into exile in the United States.

The perpetrators were part of the military government that took power in 1976 to fight communism in the name of Christian civilization. The military regime, known as the National Reorganizational Process (PRN, in Spanish), claimed to be a Catholic government, yet no other military or civilian government had killed and persecuted as many Catholics as General Jorge Videla’s dictatorship. The most astonishing fact was (and to some extent still is) the public silence of the Catholic hierarchy while the government was engaged in a witch hunt for “subversives” among the Catholic flock.

According to the most recent research, 15,000 Argentines were killed during the “Dirty War,” more than 8,000 were jailed, and around 6,000 went into exile (Morello, 2013). We can assume that in

an overwhelmingly Catholic country (Catholics made up 90% of the population), many of the disappeared were Catholic believers. Most strikingly, the toll of Catholic “religious workers” (that is, seminarians, nuns, priests, bishops, and laypersons identified as Catholics by their colleagues) who were victimized reached at least 112 deaths and 179 persecuted in different ways. Surprisingly enough, the Catholic Church did not consider itself persecuted.

### THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

During the 1970s, military governments spread terror all over Latin America. In the Cold War scenario, right-wing soldiers seized power, claiming to defend Christian and Western values. Paradoxically, many of the victims of state terror were Catholic believers. In El Salvador and Guatemala (and some add Chiapas, Mexico), the persecution against Catholic sectors assumed genocidal features: Most of the victims were poor peasants of diverse Native American ethnicities. In some situations the Catholic Church was a brave defender of human rights. Many Catholic religious workers were involved in social activities, and when the authoritarian regimes suppressed the social protests, they persecuted those committed Catholics. Some bishops criticized the persecution and the violence. A dynamic of persecution, denunciation, and more persecution started—a dynamic that changed many national churches (Mainwaring & Wilde, 1989).

The situation in El Salvador is a good example. The assassination of Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande in March 1977 radicalized the confrontation of the Salvadoran elite by the bishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero: “Whoever touches one of my priests, touches me.”<sup>1</sup> From that point on, Romero was transformed into a public defender of human rights: “If we don’t change now, then when?” His complaints would bring him death, in March 1980. His successor, Bishop Arturo Rivera

<sup>1</sup> Monsignor Romero’s homily, taken from *Monseñor: The Last Journey of Oscar Romero*, 2011, a film by Ana Carrigan and Juliet Weber, produced by the Kellogg Institute at the University of Notre Dame, DVD.

Damas, established *Tutela Legal* (legal guardianship) in 1982 to legally aid those persecuted by the government. Similar events occurred in the Southern Cone. In Chile, the Vicariate of Solidarity (1976) and its predecessor, the Committee for Peace, were created by Archbishop Raúl Silva Enríquez. The *Brasil: Nunca Mais* project (1979–1985) was driven by the archbishop of São Paulo, Cardinal Evaristo Arns. In 1989, the archbishop of Guatemala City, Próspero Penados del Barrio, named his auxiliary bishop, José Gerardi, to head the Archbishop's Office of Human Rights, created to denounce the killing of peasants in Guatemala. On April 26, 1998, two days after the publication of the report *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, prepared by the Office of Human Rights of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (REMHI, 1999), Bishop Gerardi was assassinated. Some investigators attribute the commitment of these churches to the poor to the theological renewals of the 1960s.

The theological changes prompted by the Second Vatican Council (we will discuss it soon) inspired some Catholics to focus on the structural problems of poverty and oppression. While priests assumed a prophetic role, laypersons were encouraged to get involved in politics and change the structures that kept people oppressed. Knowing that the Church was losing the poor, most bishops supported the priests and laypersons who took this approach. When the dictatorships attacked these Catholics, the bishops stood by them. A cycle of commitment, persecution, and denunciation started. According to this scholarship, liberation theology was successful because it was a religious attempt to make sense of a secular inequity. Liberation theology explained the problem of Latin America dependence not just in economic or political terms but also in transcendental ones. Liberationist Catholics were shocked not only by the poverty of the people but also by the inability of the capitalist economy and the liberal state to solve the problems. Therefore, influenced by the triumph of the Cuban revolution, they looked to left-wing ideologies for an alternative economic and political system. Those who endorsed liberation theology were faced with Catholic groups who considered them to be Marxist infiltrators into the Catholic Church (Calvo, 1979; Danner, 1994; Dodson 1979a, 1979b, 1980; Löwy 1999).

In contrast to the situations in Chile, Brazil, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, and El Salvador, in Argentina none of the most important dioceses (Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Rosario, Mendoza), nor the Argentine Bishops' Conference (CEA, in Spanish) as a group, created any framework to protect victims or to document the alleged abuses. Scholars have been perplexed by the public silence of the Argentine hierarchy in those years (Gill, 1998; Levine, 2012; Mainwaring & Wilde, 1989). In 1984, the report of the Argentine truth commission, known as the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP, 1984), established that some of the torturers were convinced they were fighting a holy war and considered themselves "sent by God" to recover "subversives" (through torture) for the "Christian West" (Pérez Esquivel, 2007). One of them, Father Christian Von Wernich, was found guilty by Argentine courts (Brienza, 2003). Witnesses mentioned that the priests took part in the torture and denied assistance to the families of the disappeared, claims that were repeated years later during the Trial of the Juntas (*Diario del Juicio*, 1985). Since then, the image of Catholicism in Argentina has been that of an institution that was an accomplice of, or at the very least did not condemn, terrorism by the state.

Argentine authors emphasize the bishops' support of state terror. Emilio Mignone, a well-known Catholic layperson in Argentina, was one of the first in writing an account of his personal experience (his daughter, a catechist in a Buenos Aires slum, was kidnapped and disappeared) with the Church hierarchy during those years (Mignone, 1999). He denounced the complicity of the Argentine Church with the PRN regime, arguing that bishops and generals shared the same goal: to defend Christian Western civilization and expel the communist threat from Argentina. Mignone blamed some bishops (Pío Laghi, Antonio Plaza, Adolfo Tortolo, and Victorino Bonamín, among others) of manipulating Catholic theology to justify the mass killings. Journalist Horacio Verbitsky (2006) argues that the Church hierarchy knew what was going on but chose to stay silent to maintain good relations with the military regime. The "re-establishing" of Catholicism as a national Church was the reward for the bishops' silence. Ruben Dri

(1987) calls that justification “domination theology” and says it was an ideological legitimation for the PRN’s “National Security State” project. While bishops from Chile and Brazil adhered to the new theological trends, their Argentine colleagues at the beginning of the 1970s were untouched by the theological shift brought about by the Second Vatican Council. Many bishops thought that certain modern Catholic pastoral practices were to blame for creating the guerrillas (Bresci, 1987; Klaiber, 1998). Moreover, the majority of the bishops were fearful of Church division. They worried about the movement led by Monsignor Marcel Lefebvre, the French bishop who ended up breaking with Rome during John Paul II’s papacy. For that reason, “moderate” sectors tried hard to keep the unity. In the historical situation it meant displacing from the administration of the CEA those bishops who openly supported the military—but also neutralizing the complaints from the ones who were worried about the human rights violations (Novaro & Palermo, 2003; Obregon, 2005; Pérez Esquivel, 1992). The few bishops who participated in either the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (Jaime De Nevares, Diocese of Neuquén) or the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (De Nevares, Jorge Novak of the Diocese of Quilmes, Miguel Hesayne of the Diocese of Viedma, and Jorge Kemerer of the Diocese of Posadas) were ostracized by their colleagues.

Another sort of explanation for the Argentine bishops’ behavior is the lack of interest in reaching the poor. For the scholars who apply the rational choice theory in a scenario of religious competence, the complicity of the Church with the dictatorship in Argentina is explained by the fact that the state protected the Church’s monopoly. Its association with the state warranted the religious monopoly, so without competitors, the Argentine Church didn’t bother to try to reach the poor, who opposed the military government. Gill (1998) says that the lack of a free religious market in Argentina was the main element explaining the differences in the Church’s reaction toward state terror in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. In Brazil and Chile the state didn’t support the Catholic Church and allowed other religions in the public sphere, so the bishops of Chile and Brazil had to make efforts to gain religious



consumers. Because the believers were persecuted by the dictatorships, Chilean and Brazilian bishops defended the people's rights against the military. Argentine bishops, who were on the side of the state, were more concerned with trying to keep intact their alliance with power. Keeping close ties with the military was the way the Church chose to maintain its monopoly and thereby keep the Catholic faith as the religion of the masses. The price to pay was keeping silent about any human rights violations, because speaking up might provoke the government (Neuhouser, 1989).

The rational choice approach to religion has received many criticisms, including the following: It doesn't explain the situation of religious vitality in a monopoly (Groski, 2000; Inglehart & Norris, 2007); it neglects the beliefs and practices that are key elements of the religious experience (Hagopian, 2009; Levine, 2007); it doesn't pay attention to other social actors, such as political parties (Froese, 2004); and it ignores local complexity (Yang, 2006). I think the main problem, in the Argentine case, is that this theory oversimplifies the historical situation and assumes that the circumstances were the same as in Chile or Brazil.

The political context in Argentina was much more complex, particularly compared to Brazil and Chile (Smith, 1979, 1982). In Argentina, political violence was a socially accepted political practice, and most Argentine institutions supported the coup d'état. Endorsement, not just from the elites but also from the populace, was important. The previous situation of political violence and chaos was unbearable. The military deposed the constitutional government without a single shot; there was no popular resistance to the coup, and the PRN could count on popular backing when they started to impose order (Águila, 2006; Marchak, 1999). Moreover, the dictatorship didn't fall because of popular opposition but because of the military defeat in the Malvinas/Falklands war in 1982. So, if the Church wanted to keep its flock, the reasoning goes, it should maintain its alliance with the dictatorship. The rational choice explanation works, but in a completely different sense, and only if we are interested in the official position of the Bishops' Conference. For the sake of the comparison, the proponents