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# Juan Eduardo Bonnin

## SCENES OF EXPLICIT CATHOLICISM: THE POPE AND THE POLITICAL MEANINGS OF RELIGION IN ARGENTINA

*This article analyzes the relationships between religious and political discourse in Argentina with regard to the recent election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the new Catholic Pope, Francis. In first place, we establish a theoretical distinction between "Catholicism" and "Church" in order to understand the historical complex bonds between religion and politics in Argentina. This will allow us to characterize Bergoglio as a skilful actor, who is able to move between different milieux, notably Catholicism and Church, to develop complex strategies in both of them. We observe these skills in four key issues in current social life in Argentina: the debates on equal marriage, the memories on the last dictatorship, the social agenda and the political system.*

### Church, Catholicism, politics

One of the main misunderstandings that have surrounded the comprehension of the relationship between religion and politics in Latin America is a conception of the processes of secularisation as a separation of the spheres of social life metonymically identified with particular institutions. So the 'separation of Church and State' demonstrated in our continent in general terms between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th ought to have been the guarantee of the independence of political power with respect to religious power – and vice versa. Seen from this angle, Argentine history is difficult to understand conceptually: although the turn of the century conjuncture reveals this separation by the passing of numerous pieces of legislation, the 30s exhibited a triumphant Catholicism, present in the most diverse sectors of the social and in key spaces of political, economic and cultural power. This triumph can be seen in the long series of material and symbolic privileges granted to Catholicism through the course of the 20th century, from the presence of Catholic symbols (images of the Virgin and Christ) in public spaces to the economic support given to bishops and priests and, much more importantly, the subsidies to private education – for the most part Catholic-run – in the country.

One way of understanding these facts is an instrumental one: to imagine that it is a question of agreements between elites, with exchanges of favours that include the Church's symbolic and 'moral' capital on the one hand, and funded offices and comparative advantage within the religious market, guaranteed by the State, on the other. This point of view does indeed explain many of the phenomena referred to but it loses sight of the social base that justifies these agreements and legitimates these

exchanges. In other words, why do different governments find it politically profitable to maintain these privileged relations with the Church? To answer this question it is necessary to abandon an institutionalist point of view that focuses on the relations between Church and State and to adopt a more comprehensive perspective on the symbolic and socio-historical facets of the phenomenon.

One necessary operation to achieve this perspective is to differentiate between the *Catholic Church* and *Catholicism*. The first is a transnational institution which, despite being firmly anchored in and identified with diverse national realities, continues to be a hierarchical organisation with demanding criteria of admission and permanence. Regardless of its theological premises – which assert that the Church is composed of all those who have been baptised (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1213) – in practical terms it is only clerics who hold the monopoly on the administration of the goods of salvation (Bourdieu 1971), a monopoly which is translated into the capacity to promulgate doctrine (fixing what is to be believed and in what way), administer the material goods of the institution and establish the criteria of institutional admission, continuance and exclusion. Catholicism, on the other hand, is a relatively flexible referent of identification which constitutes its own spaces and networks of sociability through symbolic repertoires and sets of representations shared within the group and different from those of other groups. In this sense, Catholicism is made plural and becomes different catholicisms, with different forms and intensities, from the ‘diffuse catholicity’ of a set of beliefs on an equal footing with others that are institutionally questioned, to the militant religiosity of contemporary social movements (Mallimaci 1996a; Giménez Béliveau and Irrazábal 2010). In Argentina, we can consider contemporary Catholicism, in its enormous diversity, as the fruit of a complex apparatus of religious socialisation whose origins go back to the end of the 20s (Mallimaci 1992, 1996b). In the face of the questioning of the liberal imaginary produced by the social and economic crisis of 1929, the religious environment offered networks of solidarity and stability, a discursive and symbolic repertoire, and mechanisms of social ascent which effectively replaced the elitist and welfarist politics of the preceding decades. With the explicit objective of ‘restoring everything in Christ’ (Mallimaci 1996b: 191) it managed to become a synonym and condition of citizenship and to do this it developed organisationally in the various spheres of society: courses of Catholic Culture, Catholic Workers’ Circles, Catholic University Youth, Catholic Working Youth, Catholic Student Youth, the Christian Association of Business Managers, the Union of Catholic Scouts, etc. In this way, the religious dimension began to be a part of the different agencies of citizen socialisation, nourishing a symbolic and institutional repertoire that projected itself onto the very origin of the Nation, giving rise to what L. Zanatta has called the *myth of the Catholic Nation* (Zanatta 1996).

It was this fusion between national and religious identities that produced the actual weight that Catholics gained in the political sphere: their success never depended on the existence of confessional political parties (the experience of which had always led to failure) or trade union organisations dependent on ecclesiastical structure. On the contrary, educated by the apparatus of comprehensive Catholicism, the majority of political and trade union leaders defined themselves as Catholic and defended the interests and values of Catholicism. So instead of becoming one more ideology (as Gauchet 2002 claimed for the European case), it became the common denominator of multiple ideologies. Instead of there being a Catholic party, there were Catholics inside every party.

However, this did not translate into a uniform and homogeneous movement. On the contrary, Catholicism also appeared to be fragmented into various catholicisms, some of which were directly identified with the Church, whereas others might be defined by their anti-clericalism or their challenge to the current leaders of the institution.

Once these distinctions are made one can see the various ways in which catholicisms, Church and political system articulated through different conjunctures within Argentine history. The famous confrontation between 'Perón and the Church' did not translate into two well-defined blocs, Peronism with Perón and Catholicism with the Church. On the contrary, Peronism split into those who privileged their political identity over their obedience to the church (like the priest Hernán Benítez) and those who submitted to the authority of the Church, even over its governmental responsibilities (as with Antonio Cafiero, who resigned his post as Economics Minister). So in the middle of the 50s we can find Catholic Peronists opposed to Perón and Peronist Catholics in confrontation with the Church; and also members of the military loyal to the Church hierarchy who, after the bombing of the Plaza de Mayo in June 1955, overthrew Perón's government and installed a de facto new government on the 16th of September of that year.

The articulation of these three domains (Catholicism, Church and the political system) gave Church leaders great flexibility and allowed them to articulate long-term strategic processes with tactical conjunctures around punctual demands and conflicts (Bonnin 2011). For example, take the difficult conjuncture of 1983, when the end of the last military dictatorship was imminent and the manifestos of various political groupings, like the UCR (the Radical Civil Union), included demands for the trials of the military for crimes of *lèse humanité*. One of the debates that criss-crossed Argentine society was whether you ought to try those crimes – together with those committed by the armed organisations – or not. This division logically also divided Catholicism, opposing devout members of the military like General Videla with prominent Catholic leaders of human rights' organisations like Adolfo Pérez Esquivel and Emilio F. Mignone. In this sense, Catholicism was basically divided between those in favour of amnesty and those who wanted trials to take place.

This division also cut through the Church, even at its highest level, that of the bishops. With a socially and ideologically heterogeneous composition, the Argentine Bishops' Conference (CEA) was the collective body that behind its homogeneous and uniform appearance was composed of priests who had acted in very different ways during the dictatorship (Catoggio 2010; Verbitsky 2006; Mignone 1986) and who also displayed different opinions about the question of trials. When on the 28th of April in 1983, the Armed Forces in the Government published the *Final Document of the Military Junta with regard to the War against Subversion and Terrorism*, there were opposed reactions at the upper levels of the Church. On the one hand, signalling that the document was 'courageous and well-done', Bishop Antonio Quarracino had already declared himself in favour of a 'law of forgetting or amnesty (. . .) that would avoid poisoning by hatred, vengeance and injustice in current and future Argentine society'.<sup>1</sup> Quarracino was a conservative priest, ideologically and personally very close to traditional Peronist trade unionism, who in the 1990s would reveal himself as one of Carlos S. Menem's principal allies among the bishops. By now primate cardinal, in 1992 he managed to get the Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio named as auxiliary bishop and then as assistant to the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires. The latter inherited the post of archbishop when Quarracino died in

1998. On the other hand, by contrast, Bishop Miguel Esteban Hesayne declared in an open letter addressed to the *de facto* ex-president Jorge R. Videla: ‘You recommend that we read the report by the Armed Forces “in the context” of the Declaration by the Argentine Bishops (. . .) There is no way that the Armed Forces document can be placed in this context, since from this point of view, the document is false, immoral and hypocritical.’<sup>2</sup> Hesayne, by then bishop of Viedma, was one of those who publicly condemned the illegal repression that took place in the country. And under democracy he was outspokenly opposed to the neo-liberal policies of Carlos Menem and Fernando de la Rúa, which made him a point of reference for different non-confessional social movements even if it marginalised him within the episcopal distribution of power. The distance from ‘courageous and well-done’ to ‘false, immoral and hypocritical’ is the span of positions that traversed the bishops that formed the Church hierarchy. The Executive Commission of the CEA could only reinforce the antagonistic positions when it said ambiguously that the ‘Document of the Military Junta has positive aspects which might constitute a step on the road to reconciliation, but they are insufficient’.<sup>3</sup>

Different catholicisms were able, then, to assume altogether heterogeneous positions without finding themselves outside the interpretative arc of the Church (Bonnin 2012). Human rights organisations, many of whom had been constituted around Catholic figures (Catoggio, in press), were able to identify fully with the critical side of the *communiqué* by the Executive Commission and with Hesayne. On the other hand, those in the military who wanted an amnesty for crimes that had been committed were able to side with those favourable to the *Final Document* in the CEA *communiqué* and to Quarrancino’s declarations. Behind the Church’s conciliatory appearance the Catholics’ theologico-political conflicts were emerging.

### **Jorge Mario Bergoglio: actor of the Church within Catholicism**

On the basis of the interaction between these various social, institutional and political factors, we can begin to understand Bergoglio as an adept and skilful actor, who is able to move between different milieux and develop strategies on different fronts. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires and Cardinal Primate of Argentina, then chair of the Argentine Bishops’ Conference between 2004 and 2010, he was an ecclesiastical figure of exceptional visibility, easily identifiable with ‘the Church’. On the other hand, as a Buenos Aires Jesuit with strong personal and ideological links to the world of politics – and not just to the Peronists – he knows Catholicism in all its variety and is able to play his cards on both sides without compromising his institutional capital.

This can be clearly seen in four recent scenarios in the social life of Argentina, which, in the light of his election as Pope, acquire a new significance, or at least allow new questions to be raised about the future of the region.

### **Bergoglio and equal marriage**

On 15th July 2010, the Argentine Senate passed by a narrow margin National Law 26,618, which modified articles of the Civil Code, especially paragraph 172, which clarified that

marriage has the same requirements and effects regardless of the sex of the partners. This law, which became known as the Equal Marriage Law by its principal proponents, organised as the Argentine Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Trans [People], completed a legislative process begun in 2007, though it had important precedents in the past, such as the Civil Union Law of the city of Buenos Aires, passed in 2002.

Equal marriage touched some of the most sensitive chords for the vernacular Catholic Church: legislation having to do with sexual matters, reproductive health and family structure. From the conflict over the 1884 Civil Registration Law that culminated in the expulsion of the nuncio Mattera by the government of Julio Argentino Roca, this set of issues has always involved struggle over jurisdiction on citizens and their bodies independently of their religious beliefs.

The immediate antecedent of a confrontation around the subject can be seen in the 1980s, when the democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín passed Laws 23,264 (1985), which extended the rights of *patria potestad* over children to the mother – previously they had belonged exclusively to the father – and 23,515 (1987), which legislated for divorce between partners.<sup>4</sup> Although the Argentine bishops, meeting in the Argentine Bishops' Conference, published a number of tough communiqués on the matter, their individual positions were far from being homogeneous. It is well known that the conflict provoked the refusal by the bishop of Morón, Justo Oscar Laguna, to allow the then archbishop of Luján, Emilio Ogñénovich, to lead the image of the historic Virgin of Luján across the former's diocese on the way to the Plaza de Mayo, obliging the procession to take a long detour in order to come into Buenos Aires via San Martín. And as Morales Solá has documented (1990), Ogñénovich blamed his bishop colleagues for their absence during the protest. However, during the protest, prominent lay Catholics did participate, including the then Radical senator Fernando de la Rúa, who was in the same party as the president who had promoted the law. The situation became paradoxical: some bishops discreetly opposed what the Church was saying, whilst some Radicals confronted their own party's legislative project: the Catholic Radical senator De La Rúa took up the Church's position against that of his own government, while the Radical Catholic archbishop Laguna identified *sotto voce* with the government against the positions of his own Church.<sup>5</sup>

How did the current Pope navigate the debate over equal marriage? After the violent public condemnations by the bishop of La Plata, Héctor Aguer, and a few documents by the Bishops' Conference – whose tone was very different from those put out during 1985 and 1987 in the confrontation over the Divorce Law – the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, circulated an open letter through the media, 'To the Carmelite Nuns', in which he addressed the nuns and asked them to pray to God to intervene through the senators, and vote against the proposed law. Evidently, given the public character of the letter, there were at least two public addressees for this message: the senators, who were being asked to vote no to the law, and the general public, who were placed in the position of witness to this request.

The paragraph that caused a commotion in public opinion and among the political class was the following:

Let us remember what God Himself said to His people at a moment of great anxiety: 'this war is not yours but God's'. Let Them help, defend and accompany us in God's war.<sup>6</sup>



The quote lends itself to opposed readings. On the one hand, if one considers the letter's explicit addressee, the argument seems in favour of prayer rather than action: it being God's war (and not 'yours'), it is He who is fighting (and not 'you'). In this sense, the active role is reserved exclusively for Saint Joseph, Mary and the Christ Child (God) as defenders who can 'help, defend and accompany' during this war. On the other hand, if we consider those indirect addressees that we noted above, the general public is identified as that 'people' involved in a war, being on the side of God, who is fighting in it. Lastly, indirectly addressing the senators, it establishes a dividing line: it is a question of a war between God and his enemy: the Devil. In that sense, it indicates that a positive vote for the law would be to fight on the side of the Devil, whilst a negative vote means being on God's side.

And this is infused with the image of 'God's War', which cannot but evoke situations of religious political violence from the Crusades to the various *Jihads* proclaimed through the 20th century. It was just this imaginary that the then president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner took hold of to put the counter-argument that this position 'takes us back to the middle ages and the Inquisition'.<sup>7</sup> The letter revealed a Bergoglio who, as a leader, rapidly identified with the hardest positions of the Church using a traditional repertoire like the image of 'God's war' that was much more extreme than other ones employed in the few documents that the CEA had published. In that context, his letter appeared as one of the first swords wielded by the Church against the modernising advance of the State, a 'game of all or nothing'.<sup>8</sup> Even when some Catholic journalists close to inner Church circles asserted that Bergoglio was a 'moderate' (in opposition to a 'hard man' like the archbishop of La Plata, Héctor Aguer),<sup>9</sup> his open letter clearly revealed that he unhesitatingly identified with the majority position.

Even so, this clear identification with the Church did not prevent various Catholic networks circulating other rumours. Rubín himself, once the law had been passed and in the light of the attrition suffered by the bishops, indicated that Bergoglio 'puts forward a careful discourse, and in the end, the alternative of civil union as a "lesser evil"'.<sup>10</sup> This tendency for Catholicism to moderate the hard image fixed by the Church was slowly deepened over time to the point that when he was elected Pope, Bergoglio was identified as a defender of the rights of sexual minorities. In the international press, *The New York Times* pointed to the archbishop of Buenos Aires as the principal spokesman for these protests, describing the law as a 'destructive attack on God's plan'.<sup>11</sup> In 2013, on the other hand, it pointed to how the very same Bergoglio offered 'a highly unorthodox solution: that the Church in Argentina support the idea of civil unions for gay couples'.<sup>12</sup> The following day, CNN Mexico reproduced some declarations by a young gay theologian, the Argentine Marcelo Márquez, with the headline 'the Pope supports civil unions for homosexuals'.<sup>13</sup> Here Márquez maintains that the archbishop had rung him in response to a letter of his to the Argentine bishops, saying that 'I am in favour of the rights of homosexuals and in any case, I also approve of civil unions for homosexuals'.<sup>14</sup> So, whilst the position of the Church was clearly hard and traditional, Catholic networks allowed discourses to circulate which placed Bergoglio as someone supporting renovation and opening up.<sup>15</sup> Even in relation to traditionally taboo subjects, like the abolition of celibacy for priests, a discourse circulated within Catholicism that placed Bergoglio at the head of renovation, although such assertions cannot be documented by any text or statement that he had, as leader of the Church, made in public.<sup>16</sup>

This allows him to construct a position that can navigate in midwater: the most conservative sectors of Catholicism are able to take support from his letter as archbishop identifying him with a traditional discourse that rejects the dialogue with modernity; the modernisers, on the other hand, can take the private conversations and rumours as testimony to his opening up and desire for change. But perhaps his most vulnerable side – and therefore the most orthodox – is the ecclesiastical: although he can refuse to take responsibility for the rumours, he cannot retract the words that he signed as bishop.

## Memories, ambiguities and forgetting: the case of Jalics and Yorío

In 2005, the journalist Horacio Verbitsky published *The Silence: From Paul the Sixth to Bergoglio – the Secret Relations between the Church and ESMA*, the first in a series of five books dedicated to the relations between Church and politics in Argentina in the 20th century. The emphasis in his work, however, was on the links with the military governments, especially the complicity with the Armed Forces during the last dictatorship. One of the most resonant lines of argument that Verbitsky starts to develop in this book is the identification of Bergoglio, then a provincial of the Company of Jesus, as someone who handed over or was complicit in the arrest, disappearance and torture of the priests Orlando Yorío and Francisco Jalics.

In this first volume, Verbitsky takes a cautious approach, noting something that is a constant throughout the media treatment of the case: there were as many witness statements and documents that led in the direction of an arraignment of Bergoglio as someone who surrendered or was complicit in the arrest of the priests as there were against such a view: even more, there was testimony that could lead to the view that the two priests were freed as a result of Bergoglio's interventions. One of the founders of the Centre of Legal and Social Studies (CELS), which Verbitsky now chairs, Emilio Fermín Mignone, and his wife have both claimed that the priests were 'freed by the actions of Emilio Fermín Mignone and the intercession of the Vatican and not by the actions of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who was the person who handed them over' (Angélica Sosa de Mignone, quoted in Verbitsky 2005: 101). On the other hand, Alicia Oliveira, another of the founders of CELS, claims that it was Bergoglio's handling of the matter that led to the priests being freed, which led to her distancing herself publicly from Verbitsky and came up again with the election of Pope Francis: 'I think that what Verbitsky is saying about Bergoglio is despicable (. . .) I don't know how many people Verbitsky saved during the dictatorship, but I do know how many Bergoglio did'.<sup>17</sup>

Something similar happens with the testimony of the kidnapped priests. Orlando Yorío would declare in numerous media and publications that it was the provincial who was responsible for his arrest. Even more, he has declared that Bergoglio had been present at one of his interrogations and was in permanent contact with Massera (cited in Verbitsky 2005: 105–06). On the other hand, Francisco Jalics was silent after he was freed. Exiled in Germany, he appears in *The Silence* . . . only to say that he does not want to talk about the subject. After the election of Pope Francis, he declared that 'I was inclined to believe previously that we had been the victims of an accusation [by Bergoglio]. But at the end of the 90s, after numerous conversations, I became clear that the supposition was unfounded.'<sup>18</sup>



Among human rights organisations, the Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, founder of Service for Peace and Justice and one of the principal actors in the field of human rights in the last thirty years, has positioned himself in several ways. In 2005, when the conclave elected Josef Ratzinger as Pope, he ‘prayed’ that Bergoglio would not be elected since ‘Bergoglio’s attitude is that of someone whose politics is such that he thinks that all those who work with the poorest and socially most needy sectors are communists, subversives and terrorists’.<sup>19</sup> Eight years later, Pérez Esquivel declared that ‘there was no link tying him to the dictatorship. There were bishops who were complicit, but not Bergoglio’.<sup>20</sup> Estela de Carlotto, president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, identified him as a member of ‘a Church that darkened the country’ because ‘his hierarchy participated, colluded and covered up both directly and indirectly’.<sup>21</sup> Although he was not directly accused of collaboration, he was questioned about his silence and the claim that he made on several occasions that he had been ignorant of the military’s repressive actions. Hebe de Bonafini, head of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, also questioned the silence of the Church on the question of the disappeared although without directly questioning Bergoglio himself.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, as we will see below, she made a positive evaluation of ‘his pastoral work (. . .) I was very happy to know about his work and I feel hopeful about the possibility of change in the Vatican’.<sup>23</sup> On the day after his election as Pope, a group of 44 military involved in the repression, who had been accused over their work in the Clandestine Detention Centre La Perla, raised the rosette of the Holy See in a gesture of defiance against Argentine justice through a politico-religious identification with the Vatican.

These criss-crossing accounts that circulated with a greater energy and in larger volume after his election as Pope illustrate a dynamic found between religious leaders and politics, and not just in the case of the dictatorship. With the exception of a few examples, clearly and openly identified with the military, active collaboration and complicity with the repressive apparatus can only be read in a few of the documents of ‘the Church’. On the contrary, the texts of the Argentine Bishops’ Conference display a calculated ambiguity that eventually slips into criticism of military activity and raises questions about the disappeared victims of state repression (Bonnin 2012). At the same time, the private efforts of the bishops and religious superiors within the military field were, now under democracy, the card that these leaders could play when they were accused of complicity with repression. The writings of the CEA document the Church’s ambiguous activity, which in any case was never an apologia for the military government and indeed was often critical, even on the subject of the disappeared.<sup>24</sup> The bishops, as agents of Catholicism, had private links with the repressors, which went from collaboration to denunciation, in the majority of cases passing through negotiation. In this sense, the evidence in the case of Yorio and Jalics is no different to what has been collected in relation to other religious leaders in the same period. If Bergoglio has come to favour the beatification of victims of the military dictatorship such as Carlos de Dios Murias or Enrique Angelelli, as his unofficial spokesman Sergio Rubin has suggested, he could easily capitalise on these currents of opposed views.

### **Bergoglio and the social agenda**

The great social support for the figure of Bergoglio, which has united sectors with very different ideologies, stems from his profile as a ‘social bishop’, with himself as an

example of this dedication to poverty. His discourses on unemployment, the precarious conditions of life, inflation, violence and drugs in the context of poverty have received nothing but approval from political and social actors. Even when, as we shall see shortly, these condemnations were then read from the logic of political discourse, their formulation was simultaneously clear and subtly polysemic. At the same time, by his very austere lifestyle – which has become his distinctive trademark in these first weeks of his papacy – he has become a credible figure, who ‘does what he says’. In this way, he presents himself as the exception that challenges the longstanding anticlerical discourse that accuses the clergy of wealth and luxury that contradict the gospel message and the Catholic magistracy itself.

This discourse of social Catholicism that denounces injustice, poverty, addiction and other evils is not original to Bergoglio. On the contrary, it forms part of a symbolic repertoire that in Argentina can be traced back to the Catholic Workers’ Circles of Father Federico Grote at the end of the 19th century (Auza 1993). At the international level, it was part of the Catholic offensive faced with the crisis of the liberal imaginary that was inaugurated with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and which developed what E. Poulat (1997) has called the ‘triangular conflict’ between Catholicism, liberalism and socialism in the 20th century. From this perspective, otherwise novel or even revolutionary contents – like the historical character of divine salvation, human beings’ need for cultural and economic as well as spiritual liberation, etc. – became the central foci of teaching and the practice of vernacular Catholicism (Mallimaci 1992; Giorgi and Mallimaci 2012). In this sense, Catholicism competes with other ideologies (now as such in the sense of Gauchet 2002), offering itself as a third way or third position that could make good the errors of ‘liberal individualism’ and ‘Marxist collectivism’ (see *The Puebla Document*, 305–15). This third way had received a similar formulation in one of Peronism’s slogans, ‘Neither Yankees, nor Marxists, but Peronists’.

In the case of the Argentine bishops, the social and economic agenda was always available, especially to mark a distance from the different governments of the country. In this way, the challenges to Alfonsín’s government (1983–1989) were around pornography and the divorce law as well as unemployment, inflation and the growing traffic and consumption of drugs (Bonnin 2011; Esquivel 2004; Dri 1997). By contrast, during Carlos Menem’s first government there was a mutually beneficial relationship in which the executive power made the Church’s banners its own in the field of reproductive health. In return, the bishops did not question the economic policies and the repressive actions of a government that would lead the country to a profound economic and social crisis a few years later (Esquivel 2004; Dri 1997). In 1996, when Bishop Estanislao Esteban Karlic became chair of the CEA he again adopted the discourse of social Catholicism to mark a critical distance from President Menem and his neo-liberal policies in labour and financial matters. He was still chair of the CEA when on the 19th of December, 2001, the then president Fernando De La Rúa met with a ‘panel of dialogue’ at the headquarters of Caritas Argentina to listen to criticisms from the bishops and other social actors to his adjustment policies. This meeting was interrupted by the news of the riots throughout the country that would culminate in the tragic events of the 19th and 20th of December, 2001, with 39 dead, the resignation of the president and an explosive political crisis. To alleviate this situation, the interim president Eduardo Duhalde first called on the Catholic bishops, offering the

directors of Caritas Argentina the chance to formulate a new social policy, an offer that was rejected by the bishops with the argument that Church and State should be separate. The Panel for Argentine Dialogue, as the multisectoral grouping organised by the Church was called, functioned as an advisory body to the Executive Power and was a key actor in mitigating the most critical consequences of the conjuncture. The presence of Bergoglio, although discreet, was recently recalled by the ex-president as an argument that legitimated – in a religious key – his occupation of the first office of the nation.<sup>25</sup> Sponsored by Duhalde, president Néstor Kirchner assumed his office on the 25th of May, 2003. On the same day, he attended the formal *Te Deum* at the Metropolitan Cathedral, the religious celebration of the First Junta of the Patriotic Government (25th of May, 1810), there receiving Bergoglio's first homily, in his role as archbishop of Buenos Aires. The 2002 homily had made the front pages of all the country's main newspapers, given that it denounced the social ills then faced by Eduardo Duhalde. A year later, Bergoglio's words were read as a warning to the recently elected president that he would find in the *Te Deum* of 2004 an open challenge.

Bergoglio's discourse was brought up to date to mirror the changing circumstances of the country. With unemployment significantly diminished and the economy obviously stabilised, he adopted some of the slogans that had emerged over the recent years. His presence in the shanty towns in his diocese was constantly acknowledged by the mass media and social actors, together with NGOs and iconic characters like 'Father Pepe', the movement of [shanty] town priests and various groups fighting the spread of 'paco' [cheap and highly addictive cocaine derivative]. In the same way, he quickly made himself visible at the events that acted as conduits for social and even political demands, along with victims of human trafficking,<sup>26</sup> and the families and relations of those who were involved in the tragedies in Cromañon,<sup>27</sup> and Once in 2012.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, his speeches and actions were not essentially different from other bishops before him. Perhaps the anecdotes about his austerity, his travelling on public transport and his effective concern for his priests and faithful mark his greatest difference from other prelates. Even more, it is one of the things about his character that have come to define his new public figure as Pope. In this sense, it is the ecclesiastical feature that finds most favour among the diverse catholicisms and the political system, and, as such, makes possible the creation of a consensus whose real reach has yet to be seen.

## Bergoglio and the political system

The most disputed area – and the one which has generated most attention in the local press – is that of his relation to the spectrum of actors in the government – or with aspiration to it – that is broadly designated 'Kirchnerism'. The interpretation and over-interpretation of each word or gesture coming from this space forms part of an increasingly explicit confrontation between opposition media groups and media (headed by the *Clarín* group) and 'officialist' ones (headed by the public media system and *Página 12*).

In this sense, Bergoglio has come to be considered as the 'head of the opposition', as he was called by the then president Néstor Kirchner, after a series of confrontations that had precisely as their main axis the archbishop's homilies and the 25th of May *Te Deums*. For this reason, from 2005 onwards, the *Te Deums* were held in different locations in the provinces (to the extent that this was possible), an action that sought

both to 'federalise' this patriotic celebration and to avoid confrontation with the archbishop of Buenos Aires. This new modality of civic-religious celebration includes representatives of other denominations and faiths, even though it is still a Catholic mass. In this sense, the confrontation reveals itself as a conflict between catholicisms and not as an attempt by the political sphere to distance itself from the symbolic patrimony and privileges accorded to the Church. A significant example could be observed on the 25th of May, 2008, in the middle of the social conflict around 'Resolution 125' which set up quotas on the export of soya. Taking an unprecedented national dimension, the 'Ruralists' – as the protagonists of the protest were popularly known in the press – had a mass demonstration in the city of Rosario in favour of having the *Te Deum* there. President Fernández de Kirchner, for her part, moved the celebration to Salta, the famous devotional site of the Virgin of Miracles. In a real war of the Virgins, the actors in this conflict formed up in ranks in their respective sites of worship in order to realise their political demands. In other words, the common terrain on which their antagonism manifested itself was the religious one, which was able to give a common identity to the opposing sectors.<sup>29</sup>

Another of the fronts in this conflict was that of the armed forces bishop Antonio Baseotto, who in 2005 sent an open letter to the Minister of Health, Ginés González García, who was included as the addressee of the biblical quotation that stated that 'those who scandalise the little ones deserve to have a millstone hung round their neck and to be flung into the sea'. Given that this was uttered by a bishop of the army that was precisely responsible for having thrown political prisoners into the sea during the last military dictatorship, and within the context of a fierce campaign of vindication and judicialisation of the cases of violations of human rights during this period, president Kirchner sacked Baseotto from his post. As the Vatican never officially accepted this, Bergoglio had to maintain the official position as chair of the CEA, which was added to the public accusations then beginning to be formulated by Horacio Verbitsky. In the case of the priest Christian von Wernich, condemned for active collaboration in the torture of detained-disappeared prisoners, the bishops detached themselves from the case in a communiqué in which they indicated that the priest had acted 'on his own personal initiative'.<sup>30</sup> In the same way, it indicated that the possibility of punishment according to canon law would be investigated, though this never happened. Bergoglio was also challenged for his 'silence' in this case.<sup>31</sup> In a context in which the actors in the field of human rights are tightly connected to those in the field of politics, accusations raised in one area are useful for confrontations in the other.

Historically, rumours have circulated about the close relations between Bergoglio and various members of the opposition, notably Elisa Carrió, a national deputy for the Civic Coalition, the ex-ARI – and Gabriela Michetti – now a deputy for the PRO. In 2009, the latter publicly opposed the actions of the head of the Buenos Aires government, her fellow party member Mauricio Macri, in a case of marriage between members of the same sex, where she stated that she supported Bergoglio's position.<sup>32</sup> Once again, Catholicism led to political confrontations even within the same party, once again about sexual identity and reproductive health.

At this point, the unexpected election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope Francis generated a moment of confusion that was quickly capitalised on by the various political forces. The first and most rapid was that of the head of the Buenos Aires government, Mauricio Macri, who used the fact that the party colours are close to those of the Holy

See to put up flags at the main points of the city of Buenos Aires. In the Plaza de Mayo he installed a giant screen to follow the assumption of the recently elected Pope, around which various of the faithful and functionaries of his government came together. At the same time, he plastered the city with posters of the Pope's image and the sentence 'We are praying for you' with the party name PRO on them, responding to the Pope's discourse and blessing *Urbi et Orbi*.

The form of Peronism that was not aligned with Kirchnerism – with strong ties to the dissident trade unionism of the CGT – the FE party, put up posters with its name on that declared 'Long Live the Pope'. And posters without affiliation filled the city, saying 'Francisco 1, Argentine and Peronist', referring to the closeness between Bergoglio and Peronism, especially in the light of his links with members of the Iron Guard.<sup>33</sup>

Officialism displayed a curious movement, with a cautious rejection at the start – a rejection that would be immediately reinforced by some of the most vociferous kirchnerists like Luis D'Elía and Hebe de Bonafini – but rapidly turning to quite explicit support, as with D'Elía: 'Francisco will put an end to the perverse pattern of Christianity to return to that of the first three centuries of the Church.'<sup>34</sup> Some of its rising leaders such as the deputy Andrés Larroque also followed the vigil of the Pope's election but not from the Plaza de Mayo but from Villa 21-14 in the Buenos Aires neighbourhood of Barracas, along with militants of his own party. After the first meeting between the Pope and the President, kirchnerist 'Broadcast Teams' also put out their own posters, on which you could see the hands of the two figures entwined around a cup of mate – the traditional Argentine drink, the symbol of communion – a present from Cristina: they had the slogan 'We share the same hopes'.

To sum up; the various political actors who had significant electoral clout sought to identify with the recently elected Pope. In the case of the PRO it was from the Plaza de Mayo and the Cathedral of Buenos Aires; in the case of Kirchnerism, from a place where it had a militant presence. Seeking to anchor the figure of the religious leader in zones which were clearly semiotised – power in the city, the 'poor' etc. – each actor presented themselves as close to the Pope and claimed him for themselves. This is the position that most suits the Church: once again it does not look for Catholic parties but for Catholics in every party. It thus does not need to influence a functionary or candidate, but expects that squabbling candidates and functionaries will seek its symbolic support and its political-religious legitimacy.

## Final observations

The distinction between catholicism(s) and the Church has allowed us to see Bergoglio as a social actor, avoiding a simplifying view that would see him as a static figure. On the contrary, we have observed how he can combine the institutional restrictions in the ecclesiastical field with the diversity of catholicism to steer a course through the political waters. In this sense, his skill does not come from identifying with one sector or another, but from creating the widest possible forms of consensus, even, or especially, when he capitalises on the positions of actors who are struggling with each other. This adeptness, however, is just what belongs to the *catholic*, i.e. universal, institution. Hence the permanent dynamic between tradition (supporting and adopting long-term stances and discourses within the country) and innovation (backing reforms and adopting new

causes). What he will do in the future as Pope is an impossible question to answer in advance. One can already observe changes, either structural or symbolic, which are significant: what their meaning might be is, however, impossible to predict.

There is a field of interpretations about Pope Francisco that clearly lies within the Catholic domain: to denounce him as a conservative, support him as progressive, to declare fidelity to him or rebel against him are actions that find their sense within the religious field. In this work, we have tried precisely to dismantle these discourses in order to understand them on the basis of the logic of catholicisms in contention. There is another field, however, where we think it is necessary to raise our guard: the field of democratic politics, understood as an activity in which religious criteria have to be put to one side. In this sense, the discourses of political actors attempting to identify with the figure of the Pope can augur nothing good. On the contrary, this can only indicate a will to maintain the historical privilege between Catholicism, Church and politics. It is for that reason that there might be a negative impact from the ‘Argentine Pope’ on local democracy: not from what the Pope does, but from what the politicians do to ingratiate themselves with him. Hence the need to value past experiences to safeguard the formulation of politics that take diversity and freedom into account.

Translated by Philip Derbyshire

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## Notes

- 1 ‘Monsignor Quarracino fears that certain topics will be poisonous’, *La Prensa*, 3.4.1983.
- 2 ‘This is the way Monsignor Hesayne describes the document in a letter to Videla’, *La Prensa*, 6.5.1983.
- 3 ‘The document has positive aspects, but it is insufficient’, *La Prensa*, 6.5.1983.
- 4 For a historical discussion of the debates around the divorce law and its brief approval by Perón’s government in 1954, see Recalde (1986) and Frigerio (1990).
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- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Rebossio, Alejandro, 'Bergoglio is for a great opening up within the Church', *El País*, 17.3.2013. [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/03/17/actualidad/1363545075\\_648707.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/03/17/actualidad/1363545075_648707.html). Accessed 8.4.2013.
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- 27 On the 30th of December, 2004, illegal use of fireworks started a fire in the *República de Cromañon* discoteque in Buenos Aires. 194 people died and at least 1,432 people were injured in the ensuing disaster. Regardless of the criminal and political responsibility for the case, the archbishop of Buenos Aires was present on numerous occasions at the demonstrations by the relatives of the victims and offered religious services for them in the Cathedral of Buenos Aires. His homilies were interpreted as attacks on the city government and administration.
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- 29 So in this sense it is not a State project independent of religion, as Dri claims (in Pérez, Wendy Selene, 'The Pope and the Kirchners, a relationship of opposites', *CNN*, 15.3.2013. <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2013/03/15/el-papa-y-los-kirchner-una-relacion-de-contrarios/>. Accessed 8.4.2013), but simply a politic-religious confrontation, a change in the alliances with different Catholic sectors.
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