

THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH AND
ARGENTINA'S
DIRTY WAR

GUSTAVO MORELLO, SJ

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CONTENTS

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xi

Abbreviations xiii

CHAPTER 1	Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2	“We are here to serve!”	21
CHAPTER 3	Who the La Salettes were	34
CHAPTER 4	Committed Catholics and the machinery of terror	56
CHAPTER 5	The long night	87
CHAPTER 6	“I was in Hell”	108
CHAPTER 7	A race against time	137
CHAPTER 8	“Aren’t we true Catholics?”	163
CHAPTER 9	Varieties of Catholicism	181

Bibliography 195

Index 211

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 Destefanis, 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

CHAPTER 2

“WE ARE HERE TO SERVE!”

Taking advantage of the last week of the Southern Hemisphere winter break at the CEFyT, the La Salettes went out to the countryside for a few days of prayer. On Monday, August 2, 1976, they returned to classes. The winter made itself felt: On Tuesday the third, a cold, windy, drizzly day dawned in Córdoba. Headlines of the daily *La Voz del Interior* (LVI), the local newspaper, reflected on “The end of guerrilla bands in the Southern Cone of Latin America” and reported “9 extremists defeated in three confrontations” and “Ex-governor of Río Negro detained.” According to the daily newspaper, the chaplain of the federal police maintained that “we must confront the greatest materialism in history, dialectic materialism.” Finally, it reported “A project of ‘significant importance’ to regulate the freedom of choice to leave the country.” Playing at the city’s movie theaters, having made it through the censors, were *I See Naked* with Nino Manfredi, *Virginity* with Vittorio Gassman, and *Young Frankenstein*, by Mel Brooks (LVI, Aug. 4, 1976).

The La Salettes left their house in the morning and went to teach classes in the schools of the Yofre neighborhood. After classes at Sister María Antonia School and the Sister Servants of the Heart of Jesus School, they ate lunch at the church house. *It was the only day that we could say that we ate well, because we would eat in Yofre* at the La Salette Curial House (Interview with Alfredo). At lunch they met Joan McCarthy, who was en route to Buenos Aires. She was another *gringa* who was working in Jujuy, in la Mina el Aguilar, a town in that province near the border with Bolivia, where the La Salettes were going on a mission with a group of university students. On her trip to renew her passport in Buenos Aires, she had stopped in Córdoba. During

CHAPTER 3

WHO THE LA SALETTES WERE

How did these young men come to enter the Congregation of La Salette? What motivated twenty-year-old men, in the 1970s, to enter a seminary? Why did they join a Catholic religious order "to serve"? Was their social concern connected to the religious one? What context did they come from? What were their expectations? By answering these questions, we will begin to understand the conflict between the different ways of being Catholic. Who were the persecuted Catholics, and what did they do? Why were they persecuted?

The kidnapping victims identified themselves as members of the middle class. Their parents were professionals or independent businessmen, families with a college education: *a father who worked at the Supreme Court, my mother a university instructor* (Interview with Alfredo); *my father was a doctor [. . .]; he worked in the prison system, as the director of the prison hospital* (Interview with Daniel); *my old man had been a soldier, but [. . .] he left military school early, he was in four or five years [. . .]; he worked on commercial insurance [. . .] and my old lady was a teacher* (Interview with Alejandro). In this framework, all of the seminarians had received a primary and secondary education, in public schools—*an education in fine arts in a highly liberal school* (Interview with Alfredo)—as well as in religious institutions: *Cardinal Newman, a private Irish religious school* (Interview with Alejandro) and also in Salesian and Franciscan schools.

In general, the family atmosphere was not a politicized one: *they had been anti-Peronists, but not very strong ones* (Interview with Alfredo). In the case of Weeks there was a connection to the U.S. Democratic Party: *my whole family was involved in politics [. . .]. In my hometown [Clinton, MA], my brother is the head of the local*

CHAPTER 4

COMMITTED CATHOLICS AND THE MACHINERY OF TERROR

The political effervescence of the final years of the “Argentine Revolution”, during the government of General Alejandro Lanusse (1971–1973), turned into euphoria after the elections of March 1973 and the assumption to the presidency of Héctor Cámpora on May 25 of that year. The possibility of voting in free elections, after eighteen years, had a great impact on the young seminarians. *I lived through that process and I voted for the first time, returning from Bolivia; I even came back early to vote [. . .], the atmosphere [. . .] was very politicized* (Interview with Alejandro). From the religious perspective, *there were some of us who had concerns of a social nature* (Interview with Alejandro). The involvement consisted as much in reflecting on what was happening from the point of view of Catholic tradition as in standing by one’s neighbor in difficult times. Not only was the atmosphere of both home and work affected by the social situation, but also the offices of the archbishop, where the seminary classrooms were, became *the focus of big marches and crowds; everything exploded there, I remember that we would go to classes in the afternoon and the priests would say to us, “You had better leave early in case something happens”* (Interview with Alejandro).

One of the many problems that researchers of Argentine society of the seventies and eighties encounter is how to label that era, and how to establish a beginning and an end to it. Categories are important because they reveal what researchers think of the period, the emphases that we put on it, and the aspects that we are interested in pointing out. If we speak of the “dictatorship”¹ we are speaking of a specific regime

¹ Authors who speak of the “dictatorship” choose the government of the PRN to locate the subject of their research, extending it at times to include the previous months, when preparations were being made for the coup (Bousquet, 1982;

CHAPTER 5

THE LONG NIGHT

THE DISAPPEARANCE AND THE INTERNMENT

The gang that attacked the seminarians in their house took them away in two vehicles, the victims lying down in the back seats. “We went out to an avenue [. . .], waited at a few traffic lights, and I had for the first time the unfortunate sensation of finding myself in a parallel world. Just a few feet away there were other cars, other people living a normal life, absolutely untouched by our tragedy. I was helplessly sinking into another dimension” (Dausá, Manusc). In one of the cars, those who were driving said: “*Is the ditch ready?*” and the other one said: “*Yes, yes, it’s ready.*” They took us directly to the old city hall, and made us enter still totally blindfolded and tied up (Interview with Alfredo). The La Salettes were at the D2, the intelligence headquarters for the police of the province of Córdoba, who were then working out of the historic city hall. The CLA was based there; as we have seen, the CLA was created during the federal intervention of Lacabanne and later, maintaining a certain autonomy, was coordinated by the III Corps. At the D2, the abductors kept the prisoners handcuffed and blindfolded constantly, and most of the time seated on cement benches, which was called “The Tram” (Interview with Daniel). It was a passageway that opened onto a patio, and the cells faced it too. The prisoners were seated at 90 degrees, with handcuffs, straight in that position, without letting us go to sleep, but blindfolded, and if they saw that your body drooped, they hit you in the ankles (Interview with Alfredo). From time to time, they took one of the prisoners out to the patio so that the spring drizzle would sharpen the torment. Sometimes, they would lie us down . . . and afterwards another would come and yell, “What

CHAPTER 6

“I WAS IN HELL”

Analyzing religiosity in concentration camps will help us understand the idea of religion that the terrorist state held. In the detention centers the obsession for power revealed itself in the subjugation of the actual Church and the imposition of a model of Catholicism characterized by the absence of social practices, a restricted ritual life, and fundamentally, the subordination of all to the interests of the state—in this case a “national security” model of the state.

I interviewed the victims—but how does one give voice to the torturers? How does one gain access to their version of what happened? This is a problem that sociologists encounter when, for example, they study domestic violence. The victims tend to be accessible, but not the “beaters.” They don’t want to speak because of legal concerns, or because they don’t see themselves as guilty of any crime (Anderson & Umberson, 2004:254). During 2008 I tried to interview General Luciano Menéndez. I made contact with his then-defense lawyer. As there were other lawsuits pending, Menéndez preferred not to speak to me. At least in Argentina, those responsible for the torture have not made declarations about what happened in the torture rooms. Menéndez spoke at the trials (Judicial record, Last word of accused Menéndez), as did Jorge Videla. Videla was also interviewed on at least three occasions: for Seoane and Muleiro’s book (2006) and by Reato (2012) and Angoso (2012). The same happened with Navy officials Alfredo Astiz (interviewed by Mark Osiel, 2001) and Adolfo Scilingo (interviewed by Horacio Verbitsky, 2005). General Acdel Vilas (1977), Captain Vergéz (1995), and General Díaz Bessone (1996) wrote memoirs that seek an ideological justification. These accounts speak of the general plan, of the Dirty War, of the disposition of the bodies, but not of what happened in the torture

CHAPTER 7

A RACE AGAINST TIME

As we have seen, Catholicism was a site of struggle, a field dialectically constituted; it contained many positions within the broad camp. These controversies provide a means of understanding the nature of Catholicism, and the relations of positions within and beyond it (Knott, 2005). Besides the antisecular and the committed Catholics, there was yet another main position in that field: the “institutional” ones. In this chapter, we will explore the reactions of institutional Catholics toward the kidnapping of Weeks and the seminarians. Different officials from the Church bureaucracy were involved in this case. First we will follow the process of “legalization”—that is, the way in which the disappeared became “political prisoners.” At that stage, the participation of the La Salette superiors and other Catholics workers was key. Then we will follow the path of Weeks in the United States, applying pressure to free his companions, and the involvement of Córdoba’s bishop and his curia, the Vatican Nuncio, and the head of the military vicariate.

THE LEGALIZATION OF THE LA SALETTES

After the kidnapping, Joan McCarthy left the house and sought help at the convent of the Claretians. *I arrived [. . .] and a seminarian helped me and I said to him, “They’ve taken Father Weeks and the seminarians”* (Interview with Joan). Because of her work in Jujuy, McCarthy was up to date on the social situation and familiar with the illegal actions of the terrorist state in the north of Argentina. Convinced that she knew who had orchestrated the kidnapping, she rejected the idea of making a complaint to the police and asked to be taken to the archbishop’s offices. The Claretian seminarians, who were classmates

CHAPTER 8

“AREN’T WE TRUE CATHOLICS?”

The Vatican Nunciature was kept up to date about the kidnapping, not only from Meisegeier’s calls informing them of McCarthy’s situation, but also from the communiqués from the American Embassy. These cables and telegrams that the embassy in Buenos Aires sent almost daily to the State Department are now accessible to the public (referenced here as “Desclasificados”), allowing me to reconstruct (from the American diplomatic viewpoint) the position of the Nuncio, Pío Laghi. Weeks called the Nuncio from the United States on August 28 to agree on the steps to be taken and to work for the release of the seminarians. Laghi had expressed his concerns to the Argentine government about the La Salette situation, but he was not sure what should be done (*Desclasificados*, Telegram, August 30, 1976). The problem was, despite the moderation of the Church up to this point, it had not received a positive response from the government. If the PRN didn’t show any change in their handling of human rights, Laghi foresaw an intense confrontation with the Argentine hierarchy (remember the August 4 editorial in LVI). While some generals criticized sermons and wanted to censor them (keep in mind the problems of Bishop Angelelli in La Rioja), the bishops, in conversations with Videla and Viola, claimed that the “6,000 priests and nuns” in the country kept them informed and that they were well aware of the atrocities being committed (*Desclasificados*, Telegram, September 17, 1976).

The archbishop’s office in Córdoba carried out two fundamental actions: certifying that the detainees were religious and not spies, and offering a base from which to carry out the requests and motions with the III Corps. What they did not do was stand with the victims. Remember that the intelligence services’ hypothesis was that they were

CHAPTER 9

VARIETIES OF CATHOLICISM

The argument of my work is that the different attitudes of Catholics in the face of state terrorism were related to the form in which believers came to terms with the religious transformation of Argentine society in the second half of the twentieth century.

We have said that Catholicism, with the Second Vatican Council, agreed to have a dialogue with modernity. Thus, some Catholics understood religious transformation as a cultural characteristic that must be dealt with. They wanted to commit themselves to the world, accepting its autonomy (*Gaudium et Spes* #36). Other sectors, however, perceived the changes as a “corruption of the divine” (Caturelli, 2001) and an “equalization of the Church and the world” (APM, Menéndez, Report) and considered it the fruit of “materialist” hostility toward religion and the Church. From these differing general perceptions, external alliances as well as internal agreements can be explained.

The conflict between ways of understanding Catholicism under illegal oppression implied continuities and breaks with history and the resurgence of a new form of relating to the sacred, and from there another way of conceiving political life, of relating to the community in which that political life was lived out, and of the sense of a personal life. By analyzing the concrete characteristics of the religious transformation in Argentina we can account for the different behaviors of Argentine Catholics in the face of state terrorism.

In this frame of redefinition of the religious and political spheres, some Catholic sectors believed that the only way to preserve the faith was to conserve power. Catholic believers sought political power as a privileged way to defend the threatened status quo. This marriage of Church and state generated a religious monopoly that became