



Religion and the Commemoration of the Disappeared in Argentina 40 Years after the Dictatorship

A Study of Martyrological Memory at the Church of Santa Cruz

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Abstract

This article analyzes how religion shapes Argentine memory of the period of state terror (1976-1983). The analysis focuses on the commemorative practices at the Church of Santa Cruz, a target of the former regime's violence. The article describes the mechanisms through which the church undertakes its commemoration. These processes produce a "martyrological memory" that links the secular political past to core Christian narratives about "the giving of blood" for the sake of justice and "the kingdom of God." A vision of a reconciled Argentina that centers the oppressed and the martyrs thus emerges.

Keywords: Argentina, Catholicism, martyrological memory, commemoration, state violence

Introduction

March 24, 2016, marked the 40th anniversary of the coup d'état that initiated the so-called Proceso de Reorganización Nacional in Argentina. From 1976 to 1983, the military regime carried out a campaign of terror against its citizenry.¹ During the lead up to the 24th – which

¹ March 24 became the official commemorative date in 2006 when then-President Néstor Kirchner declared it the "Day of Memory for Truth and Justice" to mark the 30th anniversary of the coup. Scholars, however, have correctly pointed out that this delimitation ignores the political turmoil and violence that preceded the 1976 coup.

in 2016 coincided with the Christian Holy Week – various groups in Buenos Aires held gatherings to commemorate the dead and disappeared from their own ranks. One of these groups, the Church of Santa Cruz, located at the corner of Urquiza and Estados Unidos in the San Cristóbal neighborhood, engaged in a particularly compelling process of remembrance. This church and its commemorative practices straddle the divide between the Argentine Catholic Church, central elements of which played a key role in legitimizing the military regime and its repressive actions, and the political left, which was a primary target of the regime’s violence. The forms of remembrance at Santa Cruz illuminate not only the mechanisms of commemoration, generally, but also how religion shapes Argentine political memory and identity along this particular religious-political faultline in the present moment.

The discussion to follow presents an analysis of fieldwork data detailing the spatial mechanisms through which the Church of Santa Cruz undertakes its commemorative process.² To commemorate is to call to remember and to mark by some ceremony or observation however large or small. A large public commemoration, for example, “constitutes the event as an objective fact of the world . . . with a social significance and emotional implication of objectively large magnitude” (Frijda: 111). As with any public occurrence, the meaning of commemorative events for people can also be heavily contested and challenging to resolve (Frost and Laing).

Research Questions

Two questions have guided our reflections on Santa Cruz at the moment of the 40th anniversary of the coup d’état:

1. What kinds of memory and justice work do the spaces of Santa Cruz evoke and configure?
2. How does Santa Cruz achieve this evocation and configuration?

The answers we offer to these questions center on the forms of memory and justice work that we encountered at Santa Cruz. We characterize these practices as constituting the “martyrological memory” of Argentine committed Catholicism (Morello). This memory emphasizes prophetic witness, solidarity with the oppressed, and self-sacrifice (“giving of blood”) for the sake of a better world envisioned, as we will see, through the lens of the biblical concept of “the kingdom of God.” These emphases overlap with the view of the disappeared and killed as heroic defenders of human rights that predominates among the political left. But the overlap is not exact. Santa Cruz’s primary symbolic and discursive framework is religious. It is the specificity of that religious framework and its implications for envisioning the type of nation Argentina should be that concerns us here.

Moreover, the repercussions of the terror have carried forward powerfully to the present day, bringing the 1983 end date into question as well (see, among others, Quiroga; Sheinin; Carassai; D. Taylor; Lewis).

² We also observed and participated in performative practices of commemoration. We analyze these practices in a separate article.

The Immediate Political Context

The acts of commemoration during the 40th anniversary – both localized ones such as at Santa Cruz and the larger memorialization that culminated in a mass rally in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires – occurred against the backdrop of a sharp and divisive shift in the balance of power. Four months prior, Mauricio Macri, leading a center-right coalition, won a fiercely contested presidential election, defeating the preferred candidate of the incumbent president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Macri's victory marked the end of a dozen years of Kirchner governance, from Néstor Kirchner's initial presidential victory in 2003 through his wife's two terms from 2007 until 2015. During this period the Kirchners consolidated their power by cobbling together a diverse coalition, the *Frente para la Victoria* (FpV), made up of centrists, leftists, and human rights groups.

Key to this consolidation were the positions the Kirchners staked affirming the demand to end amnesties and reopen tribunals for the generals who had overseen the torture, executions, and disappearances during the period of military rule.³ Macri's election raised fears about the possible reversal of official narratives, established during the Kirchner years, related to the period of state terror. Having scaled back their “marches of resistance” during the Kirchner era, segments of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo returned to the streets on the first day of Macri's presidency in December 2015, accusing the center-right of being “an enemy of the people.”⁴ Lifting banners declaring, “Solidarity and Struggle or Hunger and Repression,” they decried the return to a neoliberal regime committed to decreasing state support for social programs and weakening accountability for the past. In August 2016, less than six months after the 40th anniversary, President Macri inflamed these concerns by publicly disputing the claim that the regime had disappeared and killed 30,000 people.⁵

At stake in the rise of the Right is the question not just of who controls the key narratives about the past but of what sort of nation Argentina is to be. The 2015 vote for Macri and the subsequent success of his coalition in the 2017 congressional primary indexes a desire among significant segments of Argentine society to revise the Kirchner-era narrative of the period of

³ Argentina was unique in combining a truth commission with formal tribunals in the aftermath of the end of the military regime. The tribunals succeeded in handing down prison sentences for the junta leaders who had led the coup and implemented the regime of terror. In 1989 and 1990, President Menem, a Peronist, pardoned the convicted leaders, including the plotters of the Carapintadas mutinies (1987 and 1988). The pardons were highly controversial but consistent with Menem's “national reconciliation” platform and with his reliance on a broad spectrum of groups (on the ending of the pardons under the Kirchners, see Associated Press; Rohter).

⁴ The Madres de la Plaza took form during the early months of the dictatorship through the actions of women who would stand in silent vigil in the central square of Buenos Aires holding images of their disappeared children to protest the actions of the military dictatorship during the period of state terror. The group has experienced subsequent splits. One of the resulting factions, the Línea Fundadora, has been at the forefront of the anti-Macri protests (for more, see *Telesur*).

⁵ The exact number remains a matter of intense dispute. Estimates have ranged, historically. Chilean intelligence set the figure at 22,000 in 1978. That same year, the Argentine military dictatorship informed the Papal Nuncio that the casualties came to 15,000. The CONADEP truth commission, detailing a list of certified dead, confirmed approximately 9,000 casualties during its investigations in the mid-1980s. President Macri invoked the CONADEP number to cast doubt on the 30,000 figure (see Goñi).

state terror by minimizing its scale, and in doing so to absolve or at least to deemphasize the crimes committed during that time (Politi). The revival of the marches of resistance suggests, however, that certain sectors of the Argentine left, especially those closely associated with human rights organizations, view the current debates as an extension of the discursive and symbolic battleground on which they have sought to lay claim to the past since the end of the dictatorship in 1983. Their defense of the narrative that emerged during the Kirchner years, and their insistence on particular forms of commemoration, demonstrate a specific approach to Argentina's complicated history and an alternative vision of its present.

One of the vehicles for these acts of memorialization has been the official commemoration of the period of state terror initially established during the Kirchner period in 2006. Since the election of Macri, the anniversary in 2016 and 2017 became, alongside the marches, the occasion to reassert the memory of the 30,000 and the violent repression of the left and, for some, to demand a different Argentina.⁶ What that other Argentina looks like, however, and how it gets expressed, varies across diverse groups in Argentina. The commemorative practices at the Church of Santa Cruz offer a particularly instructive-vantage point on this contested politics of memory.

Project Background

Our analysis of Santa Cruz draws on fieldwork data that we gathered during a period of ten days (March 19-29, 2016).⁷ Santa Cruz forms one part of our larger project, which examines several other important sites of commemoration, including two campuses of the University of Buenos Aires; the former torture center that is now a national archive, exhibition space, and museum known as Ex-ESMA; and the mass rally at the Plaza de Mayo that served as the culmination of the commemoration on March 24.⁸ Our decision to focus on Santa Cruz flowed from the centrality of the Catholic Church in the events of the period of state terror. This central role took various conflicting forms. First, important elements of the Argentine Church – in particular, priests and bishops in the military vicariate – backed the junta and its use of torture, disappearance, and mass executions. Since at least the mid-1990s, scholars and journalists have detailed the critical guidance and religious absolution the vicariate, this group that Morello calls “anti-secularists,” provided for the Armed Forces (Morello: 12-13; Verbitsky 1995, 2005; Bilbao and Lede; Mallimaci; Catoggio). Ideologically, the pro-regime prelates

⁶ Significantly, under Macri there was no “official commemoration” in 2016 and 2017. No one from his government greeted or took part in the demonstration in the Plaza de Mayo, and Macri himself left the city.

⁷ The project's origins lie in photographic data collection that one of us, James Damico, carried out during the 30th anniversary of the start of the terror. We reported an analysis of these data in Damico and Lybarger.

⁸ The ex-ESMA – formerly the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada, or Higher School of Naval Mechanics – is a museum and memory space in Buenos Aires dedicated to the victims of Argentina's most recent dictatorship. Between 1976 and 1983, the school functioned as the largest clandestine detention center in the country. An estimated 5,000 prisoners passed through its walls, the vast majority of whom did not survive. After the return to democratic governance, the site was rededicated with the new name, Espacio de Memoria y Derechos Humanos (Space for Memory and Human Rights). The ex-ESMA, as it continues to be known popularly, is one of the sites of memory construction and political practice that forms part of our larger book project. For a more detailed engagement with the history of the ESMA or the establishment of the ex-ESMA as a memory space, see Huysen; Pastoriza; Di Paolantonio.

invoked the language of pollution and purification. They claimed the military was an instrument of God's justice to cleanse the nation of the idolatrous defilement of secularism and of Marxist atheism. Gustavo Morello refers to the segment of the Church that performed this work on behalf of the regime as the "anti-secularist" wing because of its reactionary stance against any diminishment of the Church's status and power in the social and political spheres. Their vision of Argentina was authoritarian, rooted in a pre-Conciliar hierarchicalism in which Church and State were to collaborate in instilling Catholic morality and Christian unity in the society (12-13).

In addition to the anti-secularist clerics, Morello describes a second group, the "institutional" Catholics, who comprised leadership that sought to preserve a political space for the Church free of governmental control, but that also sought to retain access to political institutions and leadership in order to influence policies. These individuals operated outside of the military vicariate. They were aware of the policies and actions of the regime and did not openly contest them. Indeed, in some cases, they approved of the coup, viewing it as a necessary evil to restore order. As the terror progressed, however, some became inwardly critical. Their response entailed a strategic quietism, avoiding public censure of the generals while in some instances attempting to mitigate the violence by seeking information about the detained and urging moderation.⁹

Finally, though less well known, segments of the Church that criticized or resisted the regime became a target of the military repression. These segments constituted what Morello describes as the "committed Catholics." This group aligned with the social mission emphasizing solidarity with the poor as articulated in various papal encyclicals beginning with *Rerum Novarum* and continuing through the Vatican II reforms. Committed Catholics worked on the fringes of Argentine society establishing missions in the impoverished *villas miserias* (urban slums) and participating in openly political formations such as the Movement of Priests for the Third World. There were other Catholics, a small minority of laity and religious within the committed milieu, who argued for a further, radical step: armed struggle to overturn the conditions of repression and inequality in the country. These individuals would help to form violent Marxist guerrilla groups like the Montoneros. While Santa Cruz's historical trajectory made it an important institutional anchor within the committed Catholic movement, the church resisted support for armed struggle as a means for realizing a more radical trajectory (Morello: 13, 56-86).

Instead, Santa Cruz embraced a "theology of the people" that placed the laity at the center in an attempt to discern the presence of God in the wider world.¹⁰ At the core of the activities

⁹ Morello's concept of "institutional Catholicism" marks a grey zone spanning the anti-secularists and the committed. The assertion of such a zone places Morello at odds with the reigning historiography of the Argentine Church. This historiography has established how the Church hierarchy, including but also extending beyond the military vicariate, supported the regime. Morello does not dispute this conclusion but argues, in effect and persuasively, that the relation of Church leaders to the junta was not always interpretable as resistance or complicity (see Morello: 176-80).

¹⁰ The "theology of the people" was a uniquely Argentine development. It had roots in the social teaching of the papal encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891). *Rerum Novarum* responded to the rise of Marxism, atheism, and the trade union movement in Europe by attempting to revive the medieval corporate model of the church, in which different orders of society were seen as contributing to the whole and in which charity was the governing social

inspired by this theology were individuals who embraced the notion that individual salvation required social salvation and that to achieve this wider liberation in the context of mounting political violence required a total commitment even to the point of death. As Catoggio, with reference to Talal Asad, points out: “. . . desde los tiempos de los primeros mártires cristianos, la imagen modélica del Cristo crucificado impulsa una forma de acción y empoderamiento: el modelo que imitar, devenido mandato para los mártires, es la muerte aceptada de Cristo como símbolo de la victoria sobre el poder imperial” [. . . since the time of the first Christian martyrs, the model image of the crucified Christ generates a form of action and empowerment: the model to imitate, (which) becomes a requirement for the martyrs, is the death accepted by Christ as a symbol of the victory over the imperial power (i.e., of Rome)] (106). For the committed milieu, “political suffering” – i.e., the suffering of repression inflicted by political authorities as a consequence of one’s single-minded devotion to the path Jesus walked – “became converted into a channel of expression of their will to power” (106).

The “will to power” in this instance lay in the desire to transform the unjust world. The means was the suffering incurred even to the point of martyrdom. The paradoxical end of this process, subjectively, was the overcoming of power itself through the embrace of persecution for the sake of justice. The preeminent model of and for this process was the crucified Christ. The process began with the theological and practical formation of the servant – religious or lay – and then continued through Christ-like action in the world. This action combined ascetic and mystical orientations. The ascetic mode required working directly to transform the suffering of the poor through charity, teaching, and companionship in the very conditions

and economic ethic. In the spirit of this organic social conception, the encyclical simultaneously affirmed the right to property and the right to organize into unions. It also called upon owners to deal justly with workers in the spirit of Christian unity (Leo XIII). In Argentina, during the 1920s and 1930s, various lay and ecclesiastical responses, such as Catholic Action, which grew in response to *Rerum Novarum*, sought to chart a third way between Marxism and liberalism. The “theology of the people” grew from these early initiatives, acquiring definite form in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. Argentine bishops who participated in Vatican II returned to establish the Episcopal Commission for Pastoral Practice (COEPAL) in a bid to initiate a national strategy for pastoral care. Participants in COEPAL also created a range of centers focused on social problems, following the teachings of Vatican II. Priests connected with this emerging movement extended their mission work into the *villas miserias*. The “theology of the people” emphasized the laity, and especially the poor, as carriers of an embodied, inculturated gospel. This focus provided the starting point for a vision of a “people of God” as a unified yet internally diverse whole. Injustice was a betrayal of the unity of the people of God and in that respect it called for the faithful to engage in a non-violent but determined effort to establish the ethos of charity and love. The poor served as the theological starting point because of their perceived proximity to and capacity for understanding the suffering that Christ endured. In this sense, the “theology of the people” hearkened to the medieval notion of the poor as providing the occasion, on the part of other social orders (e.g., nobility), to gain salvation through the giving of charity. The poor signified the presence of Christ; charity toward them signaled a response to Christ and thus served as a means to grace. This same organic conception with its stress on *caritas* informed *Rerum Novarum*, the mainspring of movements like “theology of the people.” Additionally, proponents of the “theology of the people” were in conversation with the regional liberation theology trends, especially at the founding conference in Medellín, Colombia in 1968, where Latin American bishops affirmed the Church’s “preferential option for the poor.” The “theology of the people” departed from liberation theology, at least in the initial phases of these two movements, in its critique of Marxism and in its prioritizing of culture – principally through the notion of the poor as carriers of an inculturated (and unadulterated) Christian social ethos – over economics (for more, see Scononne; Catoggio; Ivereigh; and C. Taylor, on the Medieval Church’s conception of an organic Christian society).

with which the oppressed contended. But for this action to be genuine it had to be undertaken altruistically. To achieve this proper state, the individual undertook “la búsqueda de un estado místico, capaz de dotar de sentido las consecuencias últimas de las acciones emprendidas” [the search for a mystical state, capable of bestowing ultimate meaning upon the actions undertaken] (Catoggio: 106). Martyrdom was the supreme confirmation of authenticity. Preparation through prayer and other spiritual disciplines instilled the martyrological disposition: it readied the individual for the ultimate sacrifice, ensuring that the sacrificial act flowed from a properly selfless inner orientation and that it was perceived externally as doing so, as well.¹¹ This perception was critical for the transformation of the self-sacrificed – through the processes of martyrological commemoration – into models of and for the committed Catholic community.

Santa Cruz and Committed Catholicism: Historical Context

The Church of Santa Cruz is situated near the center of Buenos Aires.¹² During the late nineteenth century, hundreds of Irish families migrated to the area. Irish Passionist priests accompanied them and in the 1890s worked with their constituents to build Santa Cruz. The church quickly became the center of the community. Between the 1920s and the 1960s it expanded its institutional footprint by establishing a school and a community retreat and study space called Casa Nazaret. In the 1960s, the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires declared Santa Cruz a parish.

The church remained engaged in social outreach and action during the period leading up to the period of state terror. The priests who led the community embraced the social teachings of *Rerum Novarum* and supported the Vatican II reforms. These doctrinal trajectories had a contradictory impact in Argentina. One response took the form of a conservative reaction. In Argentina, this expressed itself in Morello’s terms as anti-secularist integralism. The other orientations – institutional and committed Catholicism – embraced the conciliar reforms but diverged in the modes through which they were implemented in practice. The institutional mode was *sotto voce*; the committed mode was prophetic. All three modes sought to bring Argentina in line with their particular conception of Catholic faith. And, all three viewed the state as an important instrument to achieve this goal (see Catoggio; Morello). Their respective visions of and for the nation overlapped with other sectors – the military, in the case of the anti-secularists; left-wing populism and Marxism in the case of the committed Catholics – but it is critical to grasp that religion was a central orienting frame for their different political interventions and not merely a means to power for its own sake.

Within this context, Santa Cruz emerged as a parish firmly aligned with the committed trajectory. In our extended interview, which took place during the week leading up to the 40th anniversary, the head priest of Santa Cruz, Fr. Francisco Murray, explicitly positioned his church within the committed context. In response to a question about Santa Cruz’s

¹¹ The individual martyr may or may not be concerned with the question of public perception. There is a distinction between the subjective meaning of self-sacrificial acts, which is discernible in the assumptions and logic inherent in the acts, and the objective perception and validation of those same acts.

¹² Details of the following history derive, in part, from text in our book manuscript that Edward Brudney researched and authored; see also Taurozzi.

relationship to the military vicariate and its justifications for the regime of terror, he emphasized the necessity of seeing the Argentine Church as comprising contradicting sectors: there were the prelates of the military vicariate and there were the priests and bishops who spoke out prophetically against the regime. Santa Cruz, he said, was in this second, prophetic sector.¹³ This positioning became explicit when lay activists at Santa Cruz revived the church's magazine, *Revista de Santa Cruz*, during the same year, 1976, in which the military coup inaugurated the period of state terror. The magazine became a vehicle for deepening ties between the parish and its neighborhood and for debating the social and political problems confronting Argentina at that time.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Santa Cruz became a site of protest and resistance. The parish joined with other churches to issue a public affirmation of the inviolability of life. This statement implicitly criticized the regime's violent campaign against those deemed "subversives." It also repudiated the stance that hierarchs within the national Church had taken in support of the coup and the violent repression. In addition to this public protest, Santa Cruz continued to engage in its mission of outreach in the slums. The regime took notice. On May 2, 1976, just six weeks after the coup that initiated the dictatorship, graffiti appeared on Santa Cruz's walls accusing the Passionist priests of ties with Communists, the Montonero guerrillas, and the leftist Ejército Revolucionario Popular (Popular Revolutionary Army, or ERP). Surveillance records that would later come to light also revealed that military intelligence attempted to slander an unnamed priest at Santa Cruz for engaging in "suspicious" behaviors, including facilitating a cell for the Federación Juvenil Comunista (Communist Youth Federation) and for traveling to Northern Ireland, Spain, Mexico, and Costa Rica to raise funds for this group (Catoggio: 127-29). Three months later, in August 1976, a bomb exploded outside of the Casa Nazaret, the parish's community space. Although no one was injured in the blast, the message behind the incident was clear.

During this period, the church also began to provide space for laity who helped to found protest movements like the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Some of these individuals formed a prayer and reflection group that planned to issue public statements demanding accountability for the disappeared. By November 1977, the security forces had infiltrated this group, sending an officer to pose as a fellow activist looking for a disappeared relative. On December 8, 1977, multiple Ford Falcons, the vehicle of choice of the regime's secret police, appeared outside the church. Plainclothes security personnel emerged from the cars and then arrested seven members of the group, including one of the two French nuns who had been working in the *villas miserias*. Over the next forty-eight hours, the other five members would be kidnapped from around Buenos Aires. Five bodies would later appear on the shore approximately 280 miles south of Buenos Aires. The military immediately buried the corpses in unmarked graves. In 2003, investigators discovered the graves and disinterred the bodies. Two years later, some of the remains received positive identifications. The remains of five of the 12 disappeared Santa Cruz members were later reburied on the church grounds.

¹³ Father Francisco's sharp dichotomy erases the grey zones that Morello identifies, e.g., with respect to "institutional" Catholicism. His perspective makes sense given his standpoint as head priest of a church the regime deliberately targeted. From this point-of-view, the quietism of "institutional Catholicism" differed little from active backing of the regime (see Morello: 176-80).

After the return to democracy in 1983, Santa Cruz began to hold public commemorations at the site of the bomb blast outside the walls of Casa Nazret. This practice was a further extension of the annual commemorative vigil that the church, since 1978, had held to remember the disappeared. Alongside these rituals, the church also created permanent memorials to the dead and disappeared of the church (described further below). Taken together these mechanisms of commemoration marked Santa Cruz as a site of local memorialization within the committed Catholic milieu. As the parishioners were engaging in these actions in the neighborhood, national political forces were clashing over how – and whether – to hold the regime accountable. In this period – 1983-1990, approximately – the CONADEP truth commission began its work, the first trials of junta leaders were held, the *carapintadas* barracks uprisings occurred, and then, finally, in 1989 and 1990, President Menem issued pardons and commutations for some of the most notorious regime figures.¹⁴

Throughout these tumultuous occurrences, Santa Cruz continued its commemorative practices and in doing so illustrated the ongoing vibrancy of committed Catholic memory. In the wider context of Argentina, these practices shed light on how collective memory can be a highly contested, fragmented, and multi-directional phenomenon.¹⁵ A close examination of Santa Cruz's spatial mechanisms of commemoration provides particular insight into how religion can shape public memory. Specifically, it demonstrates how martyrological memory and the ethos it evokes produces a particular, committed Catholic interpretation of the meaning of the period of state terror.

The Spatial Mechanisms of Martyrological Memory

Santa Cruz shapes spatially the memory of the period of state terror in two ways. First, the worship space features posters of the disappeared interspersed with traditional iconic representations of Jesus, Mary, the disciples, and the saints. The display renders the disappeared present but transfigures them symbolically through this juxtaposition. Second, Santa Cruz also configures worship in the round. Behind the altar of this configuration is a large mural that Argentine Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel painted. This artistic depiction interprets the iconic representation of the martyrs of the period of state terror in terms of the Christian utopia of God's kingdom. Taken together, this space immerses the

¹⁴ The Carapintadas revolts refer to armed insurrections by Argentine army personnel. These uprisings began in 1986 in response to the "Ley de punto final" (Final Stop Law) that placed a 60-day limit on the ability of victims to file complaints against military personnel suspected of committing human rights violations. The law effectively prevented additional prosecutions beyond the military leaders who had been convicted. The soldiers who mutinied, however, did not come under the protection of the full stop law. The revolts were suppressed but ultimately succeeded in gaining concessions. In 1989, President Carlos Menem issued an amnesty for the most prominent military personnel who received convictions during the trial of the juntas. He also pardoned many of the mutineers.

¹⁵ Collective memory is a process of ongoing interpretive reception, of adaptation, of the received narratives and mannerisms through which the broad range of groups instill and project identity. Modern societies comprise diverse spheres, overlapping generations, diverging socio-economic classes, and diverse political, gender, status, and interest formations; consequently, memory multiplies, becomes divergent, and potentially contested. The literature on these issues is immense; see, among other sources, Weber: 4-28; Hall: 257-88; Kansteiner: 179-97; Confino: 1386-1403; Durkheim: 207-41; Halbwachs: 59; Shotter: 128; Mannheim: 72-104; Mauss; and Connerton: 82.

individual within a martyrological memory, encouraging an encounter with the suffering past and imaginative engagement with the utopian kingdom in the present moment.¹⁶

This two-fold encounter-engagement forces a confrontation with opposing representations of the disappeared: i.e., either as subversives in the military regime's discourse, or as heroic defenders of universal rights, as portrayed by human rights activists. Through the lens that Santa Cruz offers, however, the disappeared and the killed are neither subversives nor simply heroes, but rather saints who give their lives in consciously chosen, altruistic witness against a power that seeks to destroy the true Church – the Church of the martyrs. Their deaths become transformed into faithful witness. They become symbolic of what it truly means to follow the gospel in Argentina and indeed in the world as a whole.

The overlap between this reading of gospel witness and the discursive representation of the disappeared as heroes and freedom fighters by sectors of the human rights movement is significant, but not totally coincident. There exists a critical difference between human rights emphases on heroic protesters and rights defenders and the committed Catholic focus on martyrdom as faithful gospel witness. Central to Santa Cruz's martyrological perspective was the emphasis on care for the poor. Within the committed Catholic milieu, this emphasis derived from the theology of the people and its option for the poor and oppressed as formulated after Medellín in 1968. Ultimately, this trajectory of Catholic theology and social action sought the realization of the utopian kingdom of God, a vision of the ideal human community that overcame oppression and achieved perfect justice through witness to, and embodiment of, "the way" – the mode of salvific action – that Jesus forged as recounted in the gospel texts. Crucially, the primary bearers of this witness were the people, the faithful laity, and especially the laity who suffered, in whom the gospel became incarnated.

Santa Cruz's primary spatial mechanism of commemoration is its sanctuary. As in most Catholic churches, statues and iconographic depictions of Jesus, Mary, the disciples, and other saints adorn the walls and porticoes. Typically, in a city's main church or cathedral, the remains of a saint might also be present in a reliquary. As Peter Brown has shown, the presence of a saint's remains transformed a worship space into a point of access to divine blessing and power, an "axis mundi." The status of a given site draws from the status of the saint.

Santa Cruz approximated these ancient practices in its apotheosis of various religious and laity whom military regimes disappeared or assassinated in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America. Immediately visible in the sanctuary space were a series of large posters on the walls next to apses containing statues of Jesus, Mary, disciples, and saints. These posters showed images of individuals disappeared and/or killed by the military or right-wing paramilitary groups. In our interview Fr. Francisco explained that traditionally every church honored martyrs of local significance. The images we encountered in the church held such significance because, as Fr. Francisco implied, the parish remembered them as their own, or, if in some cases they were not of Santa Cruz directly, then as symbols that reinforced and extended the

¹⁶ Similarly, through specific ritual performances, the dead are rendered present as avatars of sacrificial love. In the Christian context, their ritual remembrance also entails an act of accountability and reconciliation. We detail these performative practices in a separate article in process and in a chapter that constitutes part of a larger book-length analysis of our various fieldwork sites.

meaning of the sacrifice of their own parish members. These symbols formed a nexus of meaning, linking local martyrs to national and regional ones. They connected, as well, through the nuns, to the wider, global Church.

The symbolic nexus also evoked the history and mission of the religious order that founded Santa Cruz. “[As an order] we emphasize the suffering that Christ underwent in the crucifixion,” Fr. Francisco explained, “his passion.” When the first Irish Passionist priests arrived in the neighborhood in the late nineteenth century, they focused on outreach to the marginalized, in particular, women domestic servants supporting impoverished families. Many years later, during the military dictatorship of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the church focused on the suffering of the families of the disappeared in their midst. “Anyone living the passion [undergoing great suffering] is our brother,” Fr. Francisco explained, “and for that reason the posters of the assassinated and disappeared are examples of those crucified among us and the meaning of our mission.”¹⁷

Nuestros Profetas

We obtained a sense for how the images in the sanctuary functioned as an instrument of martyrological apotheosis during the filming of our interview with Fr. Francisco. In the pre-interview discussion, we suggested that we might undertake the exchange by processing through the sanctuary, stopping at each of the images of the disappeared or assassinated that the church had placed on display. The space of the church itself invited such movement. The posters were the first images to catch our attention. Their placement served to elicit a reflexive procession. Fr. Francisco agreed with our suggestion. With the camera on, he guided us to an apse just left of the traditional altar. Within the apse, next to statues of Mary with the baby Jesus and other biblical figures, was a large poster titled, “Nuestros Profetas” [Our Prophets] (Figure 1).

The poster depicted three clerics whom right-wing paramilitary groups and state security services had assassinated during the 1970s and 1980s: Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador (1917-1980); Fr. Carlos Mugica (1930-1974) of Argentina; and Bishop Enrique Angelelli (1923-1976) also of Argentina. The “Nuestros Profetas” poster construed the priests as prophets in relation to the biblical ideal-type: the martyred prelates spoke fearlessly and prophetically in witness to divine commandments; experienced rejection of their fellow citizens and ultimately execution at the hands of the state; and led lives that exemplified the Christ-like behavior they called the community to embrace. The “community” extended beyond Santa Cruz to the entire nation and to Latin America as a whole. Fr. Francisco made this point to us, stating that the prophetic witness that the poster commemorated was for believers and nonbelievers alike. He stated, “we feel and remember them as our prophets – . . .

¹⁷ Fr. Francisco went on to explain that the historical mission of the Passionists included advocating for truth and justice and “the defense of human rights.” It should be noted, further, that the remains of five of “the crucified” (in Fr. Francisco’s terms) whom the church honors in the posters are also interred on the church grounds. Their graves functioned as a type of reliquary. Their presence endowed Santa Cruz with a distinct status: the church participated in the honor of these martyrs even as it created this honored status through its martyrological process. Every year on March 24 the church sanctified these dead in a mass of commemoration that entailed standing behind the grave markers to proclaim, “Presente! Ahora y siempre!” [Present! Now and always!].

. in the sense that they mark a way of living, of facing reality, difficulties . . . [for all believers] and also non-believers; many in Latin America, in Argentina, recognize in them a way of living whether or not they are believers in Jesus.”

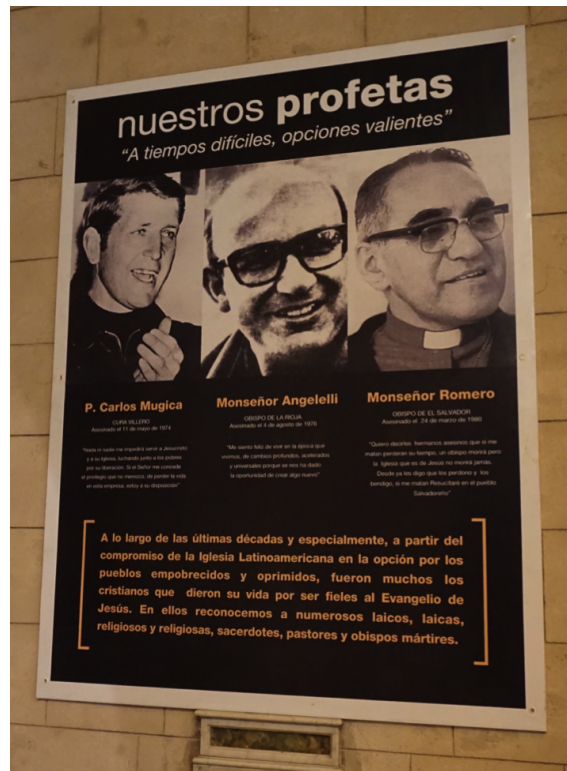


Figure 1. Nuestros Profetas

This last point underscores why Argentina’s secret police sought to describe Mugica and Angelelli as engaging in immoral behavior (Catoggio: 116-29). The police were sensitive precisely to Fr. Francisco’s point that these men constituted moral and political exemplars beyond the Church. Their altruistic embrace of the oppressed and their fearlessness before the repressive powers of the state threw into utter contrast the sheer immorality of the state’s use of torture, disappearance, and extrajudicial killing. Their actions modeled a compelling counter-morality: in the face of injustice, one had to act fearlessly if one was to be counted among the committed faithful.

The regime understood the political implications of this counter-morality and acted accordingly to undermine it by calling into question the perceived altruism of these individuals. Its derogation tactics extended beyond individuals to entire institutions. The graffiti painted on Santa Cruz’s walls just prior to the bombing in front of Casa Nazaret accused the Passionists of being priests for the Montoneros guerrillas and characterized the church as a “den of Communists” (cueva de comunistas) and an arsenal of the ERP (Catoggio: 128). Santa Cruz’s commemoration of its “prophets” implicitly resisted such characterizations to the extent they still persist into the present. The prophets in moments of difficulty made “valiant choices.” The wording in Spanish [“opciones valientes”] hearkened to the “opción por los

oprimidos” [the option for the poor and oppressed] of *Rerum Novarum*, the Argentine theology of the people, and the later Liberation Theology. The inclusion of Archbishop Romero, whom Pope Francis beatified in 2015, reinforced the prophetic claim being made on behalf of Mugica and Angelelli as martyrs of the Church entire.



Figure 2. Obispo Angelelli

The memory of Bishop Angelelli also transcended the Church. As we documented the sense-making activities at the Ex-ESMA facility, which had become a museum and site for commemorative installations and archival documentation, we came across an exhibit dedicated to the slain bishop. The poster (Figure 2) featured a caricatured rendering of Angelelli’s face and this quotation from one of his poems: “Dejenme que les cuenta lo que me quema por dentro es Amor que se hizo carne con chayas y dolor de pueblo” [Allow me to tell you what burns me within is the love that became flesh with people’s celebrations and pain] (for the full poem, see Angelelli). Angelelli thus became, in this memorial at Ex-ESMA, a moral symbol not of committed Catholicism solely but of the segments of Argentine society that included the left: sectors of the trade-union movement, Las Madres and Las Abuelas, human rights organizations, poets and artists, and the families across the nation who remembered their dead and disappeared. The commemoration of Angelelli projected a countervailing conception of Catholicism and of Argentina as a Catholic nation that bridged the gap with the secular left. His remembered figure bridged this gap precisely through the martyr status accorded to it: Angelelli died a witness against the injustice, and both Santa Cruz and the Ex-ESMA commemorated him because of this witness.

Nuestras hermanas / Madres de la Plaza de Mayo



Figure 3. Nuestras hermanas



Figure 4. Madres de la Plaza

After discussing the “Nuestros Profetas” posters, Fr. Francisco led us to the right, across the front of the traditional altar, to a second apse featuring a second set of posters. These posters bore the titles, “Nuestras hermanas” and “Madres de la Plaza de Mayo” (Figures 3 and 4, respectively). “The story of these images,” Fr. Francisco explained, “is that in 1976 and 1977 families began to deal with the disappearance of their loved ones – they didn’t know where they were, where they had been taken – and therefore they began to meet together and we provided a space for that here.” These individuals formed the group of 12 people discussed above whom the security services would later detain, disappear, and summarily execute in secret.

The two posters in Figures 3 and 4 were permanent displays like the “Nuestros Profetas” images. They commemorated six victims: the two nuns, the three co-founders of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and a human rights activist, all of whom were residents in the parish neighborhood or participants in the mission of the church. The two posters occupied the left and right spaces, respectively, alongside a troika of statues depicting Jesus and two female saints. Across from this display, on the other side of an adjacent side altar, was a fourth poster titled, “Familiares/Militantes [Family/Activists].” Fr. Francisco explained that these six other individuals were the remaining members of the group.

“Nuestras hermanas [Our Sisters],” the poster to the left of the statues, featured the images of the two French nuns. Fr. Francisco explained that the mission of the nuns had been to support and accompany individuals and families who were experiencing suffering in their lives. They did this in impoverished areas both within and on the outskirts of the city. After the start of the dictatorship in 1976, they shifted their focus to supporting the families of the disappeared. The text directly beneath the title of this poster stated: “The truth will set us free.” This was a reference to John 8:32, in which Jesus confronted Jewish scholars who said, “we are the children of Abraham” and as such, they claimed, were already free, not enslaved. How then was the truth to set them free? But Jesus questioned this claim, revealing that they sought to kill him and thereby to destroy the truth that came to them from Abraham’s God. The inclusion of this statement on the poster characterized the nuns, “our sisters,” as occupying the same position of Jesus before the guardians of power. They expressed “the truth” that freed and, like Jesus, they were put to death by the state in an attempt to suppress the truth. The drama of torture and execution in Argentina recapitulated the drama of Christ’s passion with the Argentine state occupying the place of the Roman governor and his centurions. It also hearkened to the long history of martyrial discourse in the Church, generally. Theologically, the “blood of the martyrs” rendered the Church a witnessing presence in public to the alternative values and order of the utopian kingdom of God. Through its sacrifices, it drew those who observed it into the orbit of the kingdom.¹⁸

The Nuestras Hermanas poster reinforced the point with a second biblical quotation, this time from the Beatitudes: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). This statement occurs in a series of similar declarations by Jesus in which groups that suffer are said to embody the virtues of the kingdom and for that reason stand to inherit it. Following this specific quotation from the Beatitudes, there was this statement: “Numerous religious [clergy, monastics, nuns] in Latin America gave their blood for the gospel.” This giving of blood brought the kingdom of God near by liberating humans from the bondage of fear – the fear of annihilation, of death itself. Death, then, was not, for Santa Cruz and for other Christians sharing its theological orientation, the final moment in this drama. Rather, it was the passageway to full justice, to the new heaven and the new earth, the new kingdom order that Jesus had promised in the Beatitudes.

This new order of the kingdom, in Santa Cruz’s invoking of it, transfigured the notion of secular political liberation within the terms of the Christian eschatological idiom. Suffering transformed the martyr into an avatar of liberation from the very conditions of evil – in this case, the imperial powers of human kingdoms that sought to exterminate the truth revealed through the sacrificial action of God’s messengers, e.g., the prophets, the Christ, and the martyrs. The kingdom of God overturned this human world of political injustice and suffering. The mystical politics of self-sacrifice ascetically overcame the world, symbolically enacting a new, reconciled one. The reconciliation that occurred was, theologically, a restoration of the

¹⁸ Tertullian originally made this assertion in *Apologeticus* 50. He observed that the Roman authorities could attempt to stamp out Christianity; but, as a revealed religion (a true religion), any such attempt was bound to fail, since people witnessing the executions would inquire into the reasons for them. Such individuals would learn that Christians endured suffering and death and in so doing exemplified values that Romans held in great esteem. The executed Christians witnessed to these values. And through their witness (martyrdoms) they drew others to the religion. It was in this manner that their blood became the seed of the church.

original order that human sin – the human “will to power,” one might say – had sundered. Sin, in Santa Cruz’s iconographic interpretation, manifested in social, political, and economic inequality, in the violent repression that sustained and intensified that inequality, and in the silences that suppressed the truth about the injustices done to the victims of unequal human systems. The martyrological ethos imagined a different order, one that evoked the kingdom of God as the utopian community of restored relations grounded in truth and justice.

The other poster, “Las madres,” did not convey the same explicit religious framing that structured “Las hermanas.” Its positioning next to “Las hermanas,” however, suggested an implicit continuity. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was a secular group that received support at Santa Cruz. The church’s inclusion of a figurative representation of the group gestured toward the extension of the religious into the secular political space and, conversely, the presence of the secular within the religious one. The kingdom of God and the martyrological ethos that brought it into existence was inclusive of believers and nonbelievers alike. Actions that sought justice became, in this sense, expressive of the kingdom in actuality. Santa Cruz embraced the Mothers as secular martyrs. Like all martyrs, in Santa Cruz’s interpretive setting, they witnessed to the truth of God’s utopic kingdom.

The Madres poster depicted, specifically, four women – three of them founders of Las Madres movement and the fourth a human rights worker. Beneath the poster title ran the declaration, “la impunidad no será eterna” (impunity will not be eternal). This statement related directly to the long-standing demand for formal justice and accountability with respect to the perpetrators of the terror. The CONADEP commission and the initial trials of the junta leaders had resulted in prison sentences for some of the military commanders, but within seven years of the formal end of the dictatorship, which occurred in 1983, President Menem, as mentioned earlier, had pardoned the convicted leaders. In 2005, during the Kirchner government, however, the Argentine Supreme Court reversed the Menem-era amnesty laws, and, in 2007, a federal court nullified the pardons of former General Jorge Videla and former Admiral Emilio Massera.

Still, in Argentina, there remains a deep and abiding anger at the perceived failure of government to dispense justice and to account for the dead and disappeared – a perception that the ascension of the center-right Macri’s government has only intensified. In the absence of a full accounting, communities such as Santa Cruz have perpetuated the memory of the disappeared, making the dead present. The “Las Madres” poster rendered alive the memory of the four assassinated women. Text at the bottom of the poster stated that their remains lay in the church’s garden and that there were others, whom the church named explicitly, for whom the congregation continued to search. Following this statement, was the declaration that the disappeared and dead were “Presente, ahora y siempre” [Present, Now and Always] and that state terrorism should never again happen in echo of the CONADEP commission’s report, “Nunca Más.”

Worship Space as Mechanism of Commemoration

The placement of the four posters – *Nuestras Hermanas*, *Madres de la Plaza*, *Nuestros Profetas*, and *Familiares/Militantes* – which Fr. Francisco described to us as we processed through the church occurred in the apses on the two sides of the main altar at the front of the nave. There were, however, actually two altars and two corresponding worship spaces. Fr.

Francisco commented on this fact in response to a question about the reaction of the parish to the creation and placement of the posters in the sanctuary. He said that there was no questioning of the decision.¹⁹ Rather, it flowed from the church's process of memorialization that began with the annual commemorative mass for the 12 disappeared on December 8, 1978. He then explained the existence of the two worship spaces, saying that originally the congregation faced toward the original altar in rows of pews. "One saw only the back of the head of the other worshippers," he commented. Ten years ago in 2006, approximately, the church decided to form an alternative space in the round so that "we could worship face-to-face." The decision reflected the theology of the people orientation of the church and its priests.



Figure 5. Traditional Altar and Worship Configuration

The first worship arrangement centered on the original ornate altar, by contrast, which reflected the pre-Vatican II orientation (Figure 5). As in other Catholic churches that predated the reforms, the altar directed attention to the front, where the tabernacle housing the eucharistic bread and wine sat. Looming behind the altar was a tall marble backdrop in the form of a cathedral's facade. At the center, on a cross, was the crucified Jesus. To the sides at the forefront guarding entry to the stairs leading to the altar stood large statues of two angels, possibly the archangels. High above in porticoes to the left and right were additional statues of 12 saints who cast their gaze over the congregation below. In the pre-Vatican II period, the priest performed the mass in Latin, with his back turned to the congregation. This orientation

¹⁹ This claim that there was no questioning is not entirely obvious. There is some evidence that in the years after the dictatorship, Santa Cruz took stronger positions in support of human rights. A number of parishioners who had become uncomfortable with these explicit stances apparently stopped attending mass at the church.

reinforced the separation and verticality of the authoritarian relation to divine power that pre-Vatican II theology emphasized. Christ and the saints stood above and behind the altar and from raised positions along the perimeter walls and in side alcove chapels to look down upon the congregation from on high. The priest stood before the altar as a living *axis mundi*, the mediating pivot between the human and the divine realms. This arrangement encoded the “theology of power” that Argentina’s military bishops sought to restore to the Argentine nation. The military leadership was to serve as God’s divine instrument in this reconstituting work; the military bishops spoke of national salvation.



Figure 6. Second Worship Configuration in the Round

Contrasting with this authoritarian spatial arrangement was the second worship configuration that reoriented the same sanctuary space in an egalitarian mode. This space shifted the worshipper’s gaze 45 degrees counterclockwise away from the orienting point of the pre-Vatican II altar (Figure 6). The chairs and pews formed a semicircle around a raised dais on which rested a long oaken table. During Sunday mass, a white cloth covered its entire upper half. This arrangement of the pews and altar represented a creative, even radical response to Vatican II’s admonishment to incorporate the laity by having the priest face the congregation and employ the vernacular language of the people when saying mass. The church presumably would have already incorporated these changes within the older worship configuration. The new configuration followed the logic of vernacularization to its end point.

The oaken altar furthered this logical extension. Embedded within the top surface of the table was a glass-enclosed box (Figure 7) linking the names of Fr. Carlos Mugica, the

outspoken advocate of solidarity with the poor assassinated in 1974, and Saint Paul of the Cross (d. 1775), the founder of the Passionists as a contemplative order.²⁰



Figure 7. Reliquary

The association was not an arbitrary one. There was the nearly exact correspondence of Mugica and St. Paul's deaths, separated by approximately 200 years. There was also the fact that Mugica had emphasized the necessity of prayerful contemplation and often retreated to monasteries. Mugica's colleagues described him as a mystic.²¹ Catoggio observes that Mugica's mystical orientation led him to adopt a politics of self-sacrifice in direct opposition to the

²⁰ On May 11, 1974, Rodolfo Almirón, a leader of the right-wing Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (AAA), assassinated Mugica after mass at the San Francisco Solano Parish in the working-class slum of Villa Luro, Buenos Aires. Mugica's case points to the fact that right-wing death squads operated before the 1976 coup that brought the military to power. This fact calls into question the assumption that the violence of the period of state terror was a novel development or a rupture with past political practices in Argentina (for more on Mugica, see *La Stampa*, *La Fogata Digital*; and for Mugica's continuing legacy, Linthicum).

²¹ Catoggio states: "Por otra parte, más allá de la elaboración de memoria, el espacio del monasterio benedictino Santa María de Los Toldos funcionaba – para Mugica y para los demás sacerdotes que integraban el equipo sacerdotal de villas de emergencia – como lugar de retiro, meditación y, en un caso puntual, refugio ante las requisitorias de las fuerzas de seguridad. Según atestigua Mamerto Menapace, Mugica estuvo en el monasterio un mes antes de su asesinato." [On the other hand, beyond the elaboration of memory, the space of the Benedictine monastery of St. Maria de Los Toldos functioned – for Mugica and for other priests who comprised the clerical team in the slums – as a place of retreat, of meditation, and, in one particular case, of refuge from orders to appear before the security services. As Mamerto Menapace [the monastery's abbot] attests, Mugica had been in the monastery a month before his assassination] (104-7).

armed resistance of groups like the Montoneros, which some radical priests had helped to form.



Figure 8. Esquivel Painting

The linking of Mugica with the founder of the Passionists made sense in this context. St. Paul established his following as a contemplative order, emphasizing the suffering, or “passion,” of Jesus on the Cross. Mugica was held up, on the very altar of the reconfigured worship space, as an exemplar par excellence of this mystical identification with Jesus’s passion. The embedded box bearing Mugica’s name next to that of St. Paul of the Cross was a type of reliquary. It contained a piece of the blood-stained shirt that Mugica had been wearing the day of his assassination. In a literal sense, Mugica’s blood bore witness to “the committed church,” in Morello’s understanding of the term. Mugica never had a direct relationship with Santa Cruz, according to Fr. Francisco, although the senior priests of the order had forged relationships with him. His iconic presence in the church, therefore, did not stem from a remembered institutional tie but rather from how the martyred priest symbolized for the Passionists the essence of Christ’s suffering “in the present actuality.” In Mugica they perceived their ideal selves. His symbolic presence in the reliquary reinforced their ethos of Christ-like suffering with the people.

The most immediately visible feature of the reconfigured alternative worship space was a large painting by Argentina’s Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (Figure 8). The painting, which provided the altar with a palimpsestic backdrop – it stood in front of an

older tableau of Jesus being lowered from the cross – offered a panorama of Latin America’s history and its multicultural diversity.

In the upper right-hand corner (facing the painting) are the wooden ships of the Spanish Conquista – a reference to colonialism and its continuing impact. In the upper center rise the Andes and also the monumental structures of ancient indigenous societies: Machu Picchu is visible. The middle center shows a large cross behind which stands a mass of brown bodies, perhaps indigenous and mestizo peasants. In the upper left-hand corner, time accelerates to the industrialized present. Nuclear power cooling towers and factory smokestacks belch fumes into the atmosphere. Tall skyscrapers gesture toward modern megacities in the region but also globally. To an observer from the United States, the tall towers appear similar to those of the (now destroyed) World Trade Center in New York City, symbols of the global economic order that has imposed regimes of austerity on the developing world but has also helped to create a layer of wealthy elites in Latin America itself. Reinforcing this interpretation of the buildings as symbols of the inequities of the economic order are the images of slums appearing in the shadow of the gleaming skyscrapers and smoking factories.

The main focus of Esquivel’s mural, however, lies in the center toward the bottom foreground. A figure immediately interpretable as Jesus appears as a dark-haired, brown-skinned man in white robes surrounded by children and adults of similar complexion. Women carrying posters of images of other children and a sign saying, “Niños desaparecidos [Disappeared Children]” appear in the group. Fr. Francisco explained that the images referred to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who would stand in Buenos Aires’s central square with photographs of their disappeared children in silent protest. Other figures appear as indigenous people. To the left behind Jesus are the figures of the slain Argentine Bishop Enrique Angelelli, the assassinated Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Fr. Luis Espinal (1932-1980), a Spanish Jesuit priest whom paramilitary forces tortured and killed in Bolivia in response to his human rights advocacy.

The feeling conveyed in this tableau is one of warm familiarity. It is the gathered community of martyred saints and the beloved poor prefiguring the “new heaven and new earth” that the gospels describe Jesus as inaugurating. The vision is also deeply political in its focus on the oppressed, the victimized, and the martyrs, whom it exhumes from the oblivion of secret graves, suppressed archives, and the marginalization of public derogation (e.g., as “subversives”). The vision expresses the option for the poor and oppressed that liberation theologians and the activists of the Movement of Priests for the Third World have articulated. It also reflects the theology of the people that, more than the theology of liberation, provides the impetus for the committed Catholic milieu in Argentina. This religious vision challenges the theology of power that justified the counterinsurgency policies of the military regimes in the Southern Cone during the 1970s and 1980s. In the context of present-day Argentina, it expresses at the local level a continuing insistence on justice and equality – or, in Pope Francis’s formulation in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the “hope for the kingdom and ‘for the possibility of another world’” (quoted in Scanonne: 134).²² Indeed, it is at this local level of the people that the gospel, as the theology of the people tradition envisions it, becomes materially inculturated

²² Scanonne argues that Francis’s doctrinal positions directly reflect the emphases of the theology of the people.

and thus incarnated in reality. In his mural, Esquivel visually expresses this sense of the kingdom embodied in and through “los oprimidos” (the poor and the oppressed) in the figure of the enslaved African, who appears on Jesus’ right, hands up and apart, manacles broken. Jesus, “the truth,” has set the prisoners free. This freedom appears within and indeed instantiates the kingdom as the overcoming, through the *sensus fidei*, the intimate acquaintance of the poor and oppressed with Christ’s suffering, of “evil crystallized in unjust social structures” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, quoted in Sconnonne: 133).

Martyrial Commemoration as Proleptic Evocation

Toward the end of our interview, Fr. Francisco responded to a question about the difference between the South African decision to implement a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Argentine choice to impanel tribunals to try junta leaders and their subordinates. The difference shed light on a particular Argentine reality and also on the utopian kingdom vision in Esquivel’s painting behind the wooden altar of the reconfigured worship space.

In South Africa, the option [of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission] offered less punishment in exchange for truthful statements. Therefore, we can say that as a result there was a lot more revelation of the crimes. They opted for that kind of justice. For us [in Argentina] we remained so closed and secret, so hidden, everything that was done, the archives, so covered. So, we opted for another kind of justice – judging the crimes. But, because so little was actually revealed, very few were equally judged and condemned. And the Church did not actively participate as in South Africa. In South Africa the participation of the bishops, whether Catholics or other Christian confessions, was very important and very good. But in Argentina that theme of reconciliation cannot happen because of the secrecy, which remains very great, surrounding the past. And the horror is terrible because to this day they are discovering appropriated children: children who were taken away from [detained] pregnant women. The women were killed and the children given to military families that wanted to have a child. And to this day, [these children] are being discovered, right? It is estimated that there are five hundred children according to what some [grand]mothers remember about their daughters being pregnant at the time they were disappeared. Only 109 of these children have been discovered.

The continuation of “the horror” – Fr. Francisco’s term – into the present meant that the period of state terror was not yet a fully completed event. Argentines were still coming to terms with it as contemporary events forced renewed debate. The Church hierarchy, for example, had been complicit in the terror, but much still remained hidden about the extent of its role. Only in 2015 did the Vatican decide to open its archives on the period, possibly in response to the controversy that erupted after the election of Pope Francis (the former Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio). What had Francis’s role been during the terror? He had never spoken out publicly against the regime. He might have turned in

priests to the secret police. Francis and his defenders denied the charges, but the lack of clarity remained.²³

In other ways, too, the past invaded the present. Argentines were still finding out who the abducted children were, who their parents might have been. During our fieldwork, when we visited the former detention and torture center, Ex-ESMA, we attended an interactive installation by an artist who was himself an abducted child. The installation, which the artist had created in the “Casa de nuestros hijos [House of Our Children],” an exhibition space at Ex-ESMA founded by a wing of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, projected shadow images of fathers and mothers and grandparents holding or playing with small children. There were two exceptions to the parental groupings: an image of a single child swinging on a swing and another image of a solitary pregnant woman in profile cupping her hands beneath her full belly. Sounds of children played on a background loop, cutting in and out as the shadow images appeared and disappeared on the screens.

The technique conveyed the fragmentation and elusiveness of memory, of a child’s memory. It also conveyed the yearning to make sense of the past but also the difficulty of doing so when it remained shrouded. When the past was fleeting shadows, when unidentified, decomposed bodies were still being dug up from hidden mass graves, when grown children only now were discovering that their mothers were not the ones who gave birth to them, then reconciliation in the sense conveyed in Esquivel’s painting remained a utopia – a seemingly impossible “no place” beyond the present.

Yet, at Santa Cruz, this utopia was not unconnected to the shared past. On the contrary, the church had purposively retrieved and integrated this past into a coherent, meaningful whole through its martyrological framing. This meaningful whole – the utopic new heaven and new earth – flowed from this act of apotheosizing retrieval. Santa Cruz’s martyrological memory was, in this sense, prefigurative as much as it was commemorative. It proleptically evoked the blessed, reconciled community – the kingdom of God – through its spatial mechanisms of commemoration. In doing so, it connected the past with the envisioned, sought for, utopian future-present. Fr. Francisco voiced this proleptic sense in our final conversation after the interview. He spoke of the Church and Argentina as if in a row boat, facing the receding past as they moved with every oar stroke into an unknown future. If there was any anticipated sense of what was to come (or what should come, ideally), it formed through this receding, backward gaze. In commemorating the martyrs, the church retrieved and carried forward a certain past and in doing so propelled Argentines – those who engaged its space of remembrance – into a future imagined through this past. The martyrs exemplified the values of the kingdom of the saints – those who had been persecuted for the sake of justice. Their mystical politics of suffering modeled the virtues of this ideal community. Santa Cruz and the Passionists offered the model to all Argentines as proleptic goal and as a map to that goal.

²³ For more on these matters, see Verbitsky 2005; Anderson; Hernandez; Rebossio; BBC 2013, 2016. *Nota bene*: Verbitsky’s own relationship to the dictatorship has long been a source of controversy, as accusations of his complicity and/or collaboration with the military regime have circulated since the 1980s (Levinas)..

The martyrs and the utopia they gestured toward served, as well, as occasions for critical dialog. More precisely, their commemoration constituted such occasions. Depicted figuratively on Santa Cruz's walls the apotheosized dead posed questions to the living who interacted within the memorialized martyrial space and time. The martyrial sacrifice threw the present into a sharp contrasting light. The living confronted the normative force of the remembered sacrifice. The blessed community – the kingdom – prefigured in the acts of solidarity with the poor and oppressed for which the martyrs lost their lives implicitly called the present into question to the extent this present remained out of alignment with the form of justice and reconciliation the vision enshrined. The blessed kingdom community of the poor and oppressed reconciled – balanced in justice – was what the martyrs, in Santa Cruz's view, gave their lives for. It was what endowed the violence they suffered with meaning. It was what defined the committed Catholic.

Whether other Argentines share this interpretation, whether they hearken to the prefigurative vision that Santa Cruz has instituted, is unclear and lies beyond the scope of our investigation. What our data do show is that in Santa Cruz a religious utopia can and does intervene in the political space through the mode of martyrological commemoration. Conversely, the mystical politics of martyrdom that an event like the period of state terror makes possible transforms the interpretation of the religious utopia, the Christian kingdom of God itself. Event interprets narrative as much as narrative renders event meaningful. In Argentina, within the committed Catholic milieu, at Santa Cruz, the kingdom becomes specific: the self-sacrifice of the disappeared and assassinated call Argentines to a new community of justice in which the poor and oppressed move to the center of concern. The neoliberal shift under the Macri administration augurs a different course; nevertheless, Santa Cruz remains, gesturing in the heart of Buenos Aires to this other possible future.

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