

LUCIA CECI*

MARIA CHIARA RIOLI**

Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, the rise of neo-populist leaders and political parties in Europe and Latin America, together with the election of two popes – Francis and Leo XIV – with origins in or strong ties to the latter has reopened questions about the complex relationship between populism and Catholicism.

The terms *populism* and *neo-populism* have been subject to different uses and interpretations. Historiography has traced the evolution of the concept from its origins in the 1950s through various phases – early/reformist, classic, neo-populist, and left-ist neo-populist – while highlighting key debates, theories, and methodologies employed by historians, political scientists, and sociologists. Populism first emerged in Latin American scholarship during the 1950s, often linked to charismatic leaders who mobilized mass support through reformist agendas. Classic examples include Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico. What is often termed

* Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata; lucia.ceci@uniroma2.it.

** Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia; mariachiara.rioli@unimore.it.

“classical populism” (1930s-1970s) featured mass-based politics, state intervention in the economy, with a strong conception of executive power, which was seen as the necessary interlocutor and representative of a constituent power whose constant action was trusted to bring about the desired political change. After the military regimes collapse, new leaders like Alberto Kenya Fujimori in Peru, Carlos Menem in Argentina, and Fernando Affonso Collor de Mello in Brazil emerged, blending populist rhetoric with neo-liberal economic policies, in the so-called neo-populist phase in the 1980s-2000s, adopting and transforming elements of earlier populism. In the 21st century, a wave of leftist neo-populism led by Hugo Chávez, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Néstor Kirchner, Ivo Morales, and Rafael Correa reoriented Latin America’s political landscape toward participatory models and anti-US sentiment. In several European countries, leaders and political forces with strongly populist traits have gained increasing electoral and media space by opposing globalization, expressing distrust into the European Union, and questioning the principles underlying liberal and representative democracy.

Scholarship on the historical forms of populism has approached these phenomena through different theoretical frameworks: from the historical, sociological and political sciences foundational works in the 1950s-1970s, also marked by Marxist interpretations¹, to more recent contributions based on discourse analysis, gender studies, and interdisciplinary perspectives². The enduring defi-

¹ In the extensive scholarship, see H. Jaguaribe, *Que é o Ademarismo*, in «Cadernos de nosso tempo», 2, 1954, pp. 139-149; O. Ianni, *O colapso do populismo no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 1968; H. Jaguaribe, *Brasil: Crise e alternativas*, Rio de Janeiro, ZAHAR editores, 1974; E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, London, NLB, 1977; C. Mitchell, *The Legacy of Populism in Bolivia: From the MNR to Military Rule*, New York, Praeger, 1977; P.W. Drake, *Socialism and Populism in Chile, 1932-52*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1978; F.C. Weffort, *O populismo na política brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1978.

² See at least M.L. Conniff, *Urban Politics in Brazil: The Rise of Populism, 1925-1945*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981; L. Schoultz, *The Populist Challenge: Argentine Electoral Behavior in the Postwar Era*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1983; N. Mouzelis, *On the Concept of Populism: Populist and Clientelist Modes of Incorporation in Semiperipheral Polities*, in «Politics & Society»,

nition of populism as a top-down political project based on the mobilization of large popular bases by personalistic leaders on behalf of a nebulous notion of *pueblo* has been adopted – not without distortions – to very different political projects and social and economic contexts.

Despite extensive scholarship on *populism*, the entanglements between populisms and religions remain less explored by historians. Several authors highlighted the religious initiatives undertaken by populist regimes, in particular in terms of mobilization of the Catholic population, in order to gain and strengthen popular consensus³. A number of studies have reconstructed specific experiences of relations between Latin American populist leaders and the Holy See, as well as the actions pursued by the Roman Catholic Church representatives (particularly nuncios and bishops), but also the clergy and religious congregations pastoral and assistance activities, including the use of liturgies and cults to mobilize the faithful. This volume intends to revisit the history of the connections, continuities and ruptures of populisms and Catholicism from a transnational perspective, focusing on Euro-America networks and experiences. The contributions presented in this volume reflect on how religion has shaped modern nation-states, with particular attention to the Catholic Church's position toward 20th-century nationalist movements in Europe and Latin America, and their connections with populist regimes.

In recent decades, historiography has grappled with the links between religion and nationalism, focusing on various issues. In the

14, 3, 1985, pp. 329-348; J.D. French, *Workers and the Rise of Adhemarista Populism in São Paulo, Brazil, 1945-49*, in «Hispanic American Historical Review», 68, 1, 1988, pp. 1-43; K. Weyland, *Neopopulism and neoliberalism in Latin America: Unexpected affinities*, in «Studies in Comparative International Development», 31, 3, 1996, pp. 3-31; S. Rousseau, *Women's citizenship in Peru: The paradoxes of neopopulism in Latin America*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; M.L. Conniff (ed.), *Populism in Latin America* (2nd ed.), Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2012; L. Zanatta, *Il populismo*, Rome, Carocci, 2013; F. Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2019.

³ See, for example, J.L. Klaiber, *Prophets and Populists: Liberation Theology, 1968-1988*, in «Americas: A Quarterly Review of Inter-American Cultural History», 46, 1, pp. 1-15, 1989.

19th and 20th centuries, nationalism was the most powerful factor in sacralization of politics and the adoption of religious language by the political sphere, with the mutual penetration and contamination of different paradigms and registers, adds a new dimension to the perennial use of religion by rulers and politicians⁴. In some cases – for example the Italian Risorgimento – attempts to reconcile the religion of the fatherland with traditional religion were short-lived due to the Catholic Church’s opposition to revolutionary movements and modern nation-states, as well as the accelerating process of secularization⁵. On the other hand, the participation of priests, religious figures, and sometimes bishops themselves in mourning liturgies that celebrated the sacrifice of those fallen in the nation’s wars facilitated the creation of narratives that nearly merged the myth of resurrection through the sacrifice of life, characteristic of the cult of Christian martyrs, with the exaltation of the supreme sacrifice for the homeland’s birth or rebirth, typical of the cult of the fallen soldier⁶. On the contrary, 20th-century forms of nationalism – particularly Latin American populisms – and their interaction with Catholicism have been mostly overlooked.

More recently, scholars explored the notion of the “Catholic nation” – a concept through which some sectors of Catholicism, especially in Europe, came to embrace the nation as a defining construct of modern political life, addressing also the issue of the relationship between Christianity, political modernity, and ecclesiastical teachings on nation and nationalism⁷. A central theme in this literature is the Church’s distinction between “excessive nationalism” and “genuine patriotism”, a distinction that

⁴ J.-P. Sironneau, *Sécularisation et religions politiques*, The Hague, Mouton Publishers, 1982; E. Gentile, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2001.

⁵ A.M. Banti, *The Nation of the Risorgimento. Kinship, Sanctity, and Honour in the Origins of Unified Italy*, London-New York, Routledge, 2020.

⁶ D. Menozzi (ed.), *Sacrificarsi per la patria. L’integrazione dei cattolici nello Stato nazionale*, «Rivista di Storia del cristianesimo», 8/1, 2011.

⁷ See D. Menozzi (ed.) *Cattolicesimo Nazione e Nazionalismo, Catholicism Nation and Nationalism*, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2015.

paved the way for the acceptance of a form of nationalism seen as compatible with Catholic values⁸. The concept of “national Catholicism”, initially explored in the Spanish context, was later extended to cases in Portugal and beyond. In these cases, the idea of the “Catholic nation” often functioned as a foundational myth in the construction of new political orders – as seen in Argentina during the 1940s – or played a “regulatory” role in movements such as fascism, at least from the Church’s perspective. In contrast, Brazil remains under-researched from this angle. Though Peronism and Vargasism have been compared in several influential studies of populism, their connections to Catholicism have rarely been addressed. Likewise, the interaction between populism, nationalism, and Catholicism remains underexplored in research focusing on the role of the Church and Church-State relations in both Argentina and Brazil.

A related line of inquiry has examined the politicization of religious devotions and cults from a nationalist or populist perspective. This includes studies focused either on specific historical events, such as the nationalization of religious cults during the First World War, in colonial contexts and conflicts, and during the Spanish Civil War⁹. Examples include national interpretations of Joan of Arc in France, Saint Francis in Italy, and Saint Teresa and Santiago in Francoist Spain¹⁰. The Sacred Heart and Marian

⁸ On these categories, A. Botti, *Chiesa, cattolicesimo e nazionalismo negli anni tra le due guerre. Introduzione*, in «Storicamente», 14, 2019, pp. 1-34.

⁹ In the extensive scholarship, see C.M.A. Paiano, *Liturgia e società nel Novecento. Percorsi del movimento liturgico di fronte ai processi di secolarizzazione*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2000; L. Ceci, *Il vessillo e la croce. Colonialismo, missioni cattoliche e islam in Somalia (1903-1924)*, Rome, Carocci, 2006; A. Becker, *Faith, Ideologies, and the “Cultures of War”*, in J. Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 234-247; S. Lesti, *Riti di Guerra. Religione e politica nell’Europa della Grande Guerra*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2015; P.J. Houlihan, *Catholicism and the Great War. Religion and Everyday Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1922*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, and S. Rodríguez Serrador, R. Serrano García, *Aspectos de la piedad nacionalcatólica en España en tiempos de guerra civil. Valladolid, 1936-1941*, in «Archivio italiano per la storia della Pietà», 32, 2019, pp. 113-136.

¹⁰ See T. Calì, R. Rusconi (eds.), *San Francesco d’Italia. Santità e identità nazionale*, Rome, Viella, 2010; G. Di Febo, *Ritos de guerra y de victoria en la España franquista*, València, Publi-

devotions has also received scholarly attention, with notable contributions focusing on specific icons such as the Virgin of Pilar, Our Lady of Fátima, and the Virgin of Covadonga¹¹. The political re-signification of Eucharistic worship has similarly been studied through the lens of international Eucharistic congresses, such as those held in Madrid, Chicago, Buenos Aires, and Barcelona¹².

While these studies extend into the 1930s, the pontificate of Pius XII (1939-1958) remains largely unexamined in relation to these themes. Even the wave of new historical inquiry prompted by the 2020 opening of the Vatican archives for the pontificate of Pius XII has, so far, mostly focused on other topics – such as the Holocaust, the Cold War, and Communism – leaving the nexus of populism, nationalism, and Catholicism largely unexplored¹³.

On the other hand, two of the most significant political experiences in 20th-century Latin America – Peronism in Argentina and Vargasism in Brazil – have been the subject of numerous comparative approaches in studies on populism that have, however, left in the shade the relationship of both with Catholicism. This volume intends to reconstruct both the strategies implemented by institutional actors and the elaboration and circulation of reflections, devotional practices, symbolic repertoires expressed

cacions de la Universitat de València, 2012; X. Boniface, *Le culte de Jeanne d'Arc en France durant la Grande Guerre*, in «Archivio italiano per la storia della Pietà», 32, 2019, pp. 17-37.

¹¹ See, for example, F. Naldi, *Propaganda, religione, franchismo. Il culto della Vergine del Pilar durante la Guerra civile spagnola (1936-1939)*, in «Spagna Contemporanea», 44, 2013, pp. 103-123; F.J. Ramón Solans, *La Virgen del Pilar dice... Usos políticos y nacionales de un culto mariano en la España contemporánea*, Zaragoza, Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2014; J. Barreto, *I messaggi di Fatima tra anticomunismo, religiosità popolare e riconquista cattolica*, in L. Ceci (ed.), *Culti di fine millennio. Devozioni di massa e modernità nell'universo cattolico*, «Memoria e ricerca», 3, 2016, pp. 395-419, and, more in general, R. di Stefano, F.J. Ramón Solans (eds.), *Marian Devotions, Political Mobilizations, and Nationalism in Europe and Latin America*, London, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2016.

¹² M. Lida, *Los congresos eucarísticos en la Argentina del siglo XX*, in «Investigaciones Y Ensayos», 58, 2009, pp. 285-324; L. Ceci, *The International Eucharistic Congress in Chicago (1926)*, in «The Catholic Historical Review», 110, 4, 2024, pp. 752-776, and N. Núñez Bargueño, *Fe, modernidad y política. Los congresos eucarísticos internacionales. Madrid, 1911-Barcelona, 1952*, Granada, Comares, 2024.

¹³ S. Unger-Alvi, N. Valbousquet (eds.), *The Global Pontificate of Pius XII: War and Genocide, Reconstruction and Change, 1939-1958*, New York, Berghahn, 2024.

by different subjects within an in relation with Catholic institutions and actors. The interpretative fulcrum of the book and its historiographical innovativeness lie in the attention it focuses on institutional, cultural and devotional aspects in a transnational perspective, between Europe and Latin America, starting from the hypothesis that the examination of spatially distant cases can better illuminate more or less inner connections and specificities.

The intertwining of Latin American nationalism and populism with Catholicism, in the cases examined in the volume, has contributed significantly to authoritarian political solutions. This was not only because of the barrier that governments erected against the communist threat, but even more so because of the objective convergence on the concept and model of a homogeneous and organic society, on an economy conceived primarily in corporate terms, on the confessional nature of states or at least on their willingness to grant broad autonomy to the Catholic Church and full access to the public sphere.

Methodologically, the cultural, institutional, transnational and global approach adopted in this book also aims to overcome the traditional classification of “church history” or “religious history”, and shows how an adequate understanding of the role of Catholicism at a global level is essential for reconstructing the historical processes that unfolded in the 20th century¹⁴.

With regard to Brazil, the contribution of Fabio Gentile sheds light on Catholicism during the Vargas era. As Fabio Gentile retraces, a considerable body of scholarship has addressed liberalism, authoritarianism, and socialism in Brazil from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century.

¹⁴ This approach has known a recent application in the studies of 20th century Christianity and it particularly fits the analysis of a pontificate, that one of Pius XII, that has crossed and influenced global events and phenomena See, for example, G. Chamedes, *A Twentieth-century Crusade: the Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe*, Cambridge-London, Cambridge University Press, 2019; M.C. Rioli, *A Liminal Church. Refugees, Conversions and the latin Diocese of Jerusalem, 1946-1956*, Boston-Leiden, Brill, 2020; L. Ceci, *Catholics and Political Violence in the Twentieth Century*, London-New York, Routledge, 2025, and S. Unger-Alvi, Valbousquet (eds.), *The Global Pontificate of Pius XII*, cit.

In contrast, the study of Brazilian Catholicism during the same period remains notably underdeveloped. This is evidenced by the relative paucity of academic works on the subject, compounded by a significant chronological gap that suggests a lack of generational continuity among researchers. Drawing on the principal literature available and archival materials from the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil (Contemporary Brazilian History Research and Documentation Center, CPDOC), his chapter reconsiders Brazilian Catholicism in the first half of the twentieth century through the analysis of the Centro Dom Vital – the foundational core of Brazilian Catholic associationalism – and its principal intellectual platform, the journal «A Ordem». By situating Brazilian Catholicism within transnational networks of Catholic thought, Gentile shows how religious actors shaped the populist discourse of the Estado Novo.

Jair Santos's chapter examines how the Roman Catholic Church and the Brazilian state forged a cooperative relationship during the first half of the 20th century. Santos discusses specific examples that reveal how religious symbols and devotions were employed for political purposes, such as the designation of Our Lady of Aparecida as the country's patron saint, the construction of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, and the organization of national Eucharistic congresses. When Brazil became a republic in 1889, the separation of Church and State brought an end to the monarchy's control over religious affairs through the patronage system. Yet, unlike what occurred in countries like Portugal, this change didn't lead to conflict between religious and secular authorities. Instead, the early republican period witnessed growing cooperation between Church and State, as both institutions worked together to promote a new national identity. The Church saw in the new political landscape a chance to act more independently, while the government regarded Catholicism as a valuable force for national cohesion and a means to rally support for the Republic.

In the early 20th century, the effort to consolidate the Republic fostered a mutual understanding between political and religious leaders. This collaboration was reflected in various Catholic

events – often attended by political figures – which aimed to emphasize the public, activist dimension of Catholicism and to assert the Church’s legitimate role in guiding society according to its moral principles.

Liturgies and rituals were mobilized as tools to consolidate Catholicism’s role as a stabilizing force and a guarantor of social cohesion. This initiative aligned with the broader objective of the papacy in the early twentieth century: the restoration of a hierocratic order in which the Church would exert normative authority over collective life. Liturgies thus contributed to the redefinition of Church-Republic relations during Brazil’s formative republican period. The State’s implicit recognition of the Church’s authority in shaping the social order enabled Catholicism to assert itself as a central actor in the public sphere, despite the constitutional principle of Church-State separation. As illustrated by the proclamation of Our Lady of Aparecida as the patroness of Brazil and the construction of the Christ the Redeemer monument, the Church sought to reaffirm its position as a moral compass at a time when the nation was grappling with the challenges of defining its identity in the wake of republican transformation. The doctrinal and political aims of the papacy ultimately found concrete expression in Brazil through the Eucharistic Congresses, which served as visible manifestations of lay Catholic engagement in the urban space, conceived as a setting for religious renewal and public presence.

Turning to Argentina, Diego Mauro explores the connections between Peronism and Marian devotion with two main goals: first, to gain deeper insight into one facet of Peronist identity by examining how expressions of Marian faith evolved at key shrines; and second, to shed light on the underlying tensions that culminated in the 1955 conflict. The relationship between Peronism and the Catholic Church has long been a central and much-debated topic in Argentine historiography. This is likely because what once seemed to be a strong alliance eventually unraveled into a bitter confrontation, which played a key role in the military coup that deposed Juan Perón in September 1955. The chapter unpacks

chronologies, continuities and fractures. How did the partnership deteriorate to the point where the Corpus Christi procession in June 1955 turned into a public protest against Perón? And how did tensions escalate to such a degree that, shortly after, naval aircraft marked with a cross inside the letter “V” – alluding to the slogan “Cristo Vence” (“Christ Conquers”) – bombed the presidential palace?

Mauro’s chapter contributes to a renewed interest in Marian devotion as a research perspective through which to re-assess the relationship between Peronism and Catholicism. Marian cults were among the most vibrant and influential religious expressions in early 20th-century Argentina. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Church gained significant public presence through its Marian shrines. It is therefore not surprising that, during his 1946 presidential campaign, Perón made a symbolic visit to the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján. Once in office, he actively encouraged Marian devotion, particularly in the popular form supported by Bishop Agustín Serafini of Mercedes. During these years, Perón and Eva frequently visited Marian shrines, and public demonstrations of Marian piety became increasingly common. A particularly significant moment came in December 1953, when Perón played a leading role in the coronation ceremony for the missionary image of the Virgin of Luján. On that occasion, he delivered his well-known Prayer to the Virgin, in which he tied Marian devotion to the foundational ideals of his political movement. In this light, it becomes clear that Marian devotion served as one of the cultural and emotional forces that helped shape Peronist identity.

Following Mauro’s contribution, Celina Albornoz examines the relationship between the Vatican and Peronism by analyzing how the Holy See viewed the rise of Peronism and the initial phase of Juan Domingo Perón’s presidency (1945-1948). Albornoz re-considers the Vatican’s perspective of Perón and his government during his emergence and consolidation as a political leader. The author traces the interest demonstrated by the Vatican in carrying out a detailed follow-up of political and religious events in Argentina. Albornoz highlights the shift between the 1946 presidential

election, when Nuncio Fietta exhibited a rather accommodating stance towards Peronism, and the 1948 legislative elections, when his reports expressed growing concern about the Communist Party's activities and called for a stronger governmental response. Fietta's correspondence portrayed the president as an ally in a shared struggle. Once again, the Peronist option was again framed as the "lesser evil" for these elections, just as it had been in the previous presidential elections, when compared to the more overtly "anti-clerical" alternatives that posed a greater threat to the Church. Towards the end of 1948, the nuncio's favorable view of Perón and his administration began to shift toward open criticism. While he did not elaborate on the specific reasons, he accused the government of being "prone to de facto totalitarianism", echoing sentiments expressed by the opposition. Albornoz therefore clears that, during the presidential elections and Perón's early tenure, the nuncio held a predominantly benevolent and hopeful view, albeit with some nuances and reservations. However, this perspective soured in light in response to the developments of Perón's first years in office. By the end of 1948, on the eve of the constitutional reform, the nuncio's opinion of Perón had become markedly more critical. By focusing on the shifting stance of Fietta, the chapter sheds light on the Vatican's strategic balancing act between doctrinal concerns, diplomatic calculations and the search for stable allies in a volatile postwar Latin America.

Moving from Argentina to Euro-American ties, César Rina Simón offers an interpretative overview of the evolution of festive and devotional practices in Spain from 1936 to 1958, shaped by the Civil War, the victory, and the mechanisms of sacred-popular legitimation employed by the regime. His chapter offers a historiographical and cultural analysis of the significance acquired by devotions rooted in the sphere of popular religiosity in shaping the ideological framework of early Francoism. From the earliest stages of the Civil War, the rebel faction mobilized key local devotional references through rituals, symbols, and sacro-popular practices of legitimation. Religious images were deployed in public spaces to sacralize the military victory and affirm the providential authority

of the dictator. The inherent polysemy of devotional phenomena enabled a range of interpretations, from fascist palingenetic narratives that linked Christ's Passion, death, and resurrection with that of Spain, to the reinterpretation of such devotions as essential markers of national-Catholicism. This study aims to highlight points of contention surrounding ritual and festive religious resources, their diachronic evolution, and the adaptive capacities of devotional practices and beliefs in response to both internal and external contexts. Rina also examines the transformation of rites initially linked to the war and the celebration of victory during the 1940s. These gradually evolved into commodified expressions of the regime's national-Catholic identity, strategically deployed to attract tourists while reinforcing an idealized image of the country. Devotions with strong community roots were reinterpreted and put at the service of Francoist legitimacy and its historical narrative, but because of their identity-based nature and flexibility, they survived the regime, sometimes even with renewed vitality during the democratic period. The diachronic trajectory of popular devotional practices reveals, on the one hand, their deep entrenchment in local imaginaries and their potential to generate identity-based, traditional, and transcendent bonds. This demonstrates how devotional phenomena, though cloaked in an aura of timelessness, are in fact dynamic forms that allow for a more nuanced understanding of historical processes. They are both expressions of their time and spaces for the construction of political and cultural imaginaries-sites of meaning-making within local contexts marked by the multifaceted interplay between the sacred and identity.

The history of the Vatican recognition of Francisco Franco's government and the complex process that led to the signature of the 1953 Concordat is approached by Juan de Lara Vázquez. While the Holy See was one of the first states to recognize Francisco Franco's government, it was also among the last to establish a formal agreement between the two states. This did not mean that relations between them were consistently poor: on the contrary, from 1943 onward, Franco's Spain, in order to survive the collapse

of the fascist regimes, altered its status by attempting to position itself among the neutral nations. This strategy, aimed at finding a way out that would guarantee the survival and continuity of the regime, failed to avoid the inevitable attempt at international isolation. Later, taking advantage of the emergence of two opposing blocs at the start of the Cold War, the regime played the anti-communist card in order to block any attempt to restore the monarchy or introduce any form of representative government. Until now, Spanish documentation has enabled historians to analyze the concerns of the Francoist regime and the requests it addressed to the Secretariat of State through Nuncio Cicognani and the Spanish embassy to the Holy See. Today, thanks to documents that have recently become available in the Vatican archives, we can begin to reconstruct how the situation in Spain was viewed from Rome, the concerns that were raised, and the steps taken by pontifical diplomacy to mediate the regime's difficult international standing. One of the objectives was to present Franco's Spain as a Catholic authoritarian regime in which social peace prevailed and there was no risk of a communist system being established. This was one of the reasons behind the repeated appeals to the Spanish government to show greater Christian charity toward prisoners and to undertake social and political reforms that would allow for broader participation.

The Concordat became a fundamental goal for Francoism, essential to completing its transformation from a pro-fascist to a Catholic and anti-communist regime. The significance of the Concordat in the relationship between the Catholic Church and Franco's Spain has been widely debated since the 1970s. Scholars have questioned the actual influence the Holy See had during these years, and now new questions and critical perspectives can begin to emerge regarding the period 1939-1958.

While the concept of populism has not frequently been applied by historians to the analysis of national-Catholicism, this article aims to focus on the notion of "the people" as it was employed by political and religious actors in Spain during a particularly significant context: the early years of the Cold War. Within this

framework, Cattini analyses the mass demonstrations that took place in Catalonia between 1947 and 1952. These events are of particular interest for several reasons. First, there was a deliberate effort to present Barcelona on the international stage as a “martyred” city that, having endured the religious persecution of the Civil War, had now become a model region of Catholic devotion. The trauma of the Civil War remained strong – about a third of Catalan priests (around 1,500) had been killed during the first months of the conflict, along with roughly a thousand members of various religious orders. The religious revival in Barcelona and across Catalonia thus carried powerful symbolic weight, reflecting both the reassertion and the public visibility of the Church, as well as the “Catholic restoration” promoted by the Franco regime.

Analyzing Catholic discourse during the pontificate of Pius XII – spanning the late 1940s to early 1950s – reveals the specific features of a political narrative aimed at re-Catholicizing society in the context of the Cold War. Within this discourse, appeals to the concept of “the people” display striking similarities to a distinct form of Catholic populism. Pius XII believed that to counter the spread of communism, the Vatican needed to engage actively in international politics. As previously noted, the selection of Barcelona as a site of major Catholic celebration carried deep symbolic weight. Internationally, as Cattini points out, the city was known as a revolutionary capital – once dubbed “the Mecca of anarchism” – and a hub of labor activism. Transforming it into a Catholic stronghold was one of the major symbolic challenges for both the Franco regime and the Spanish Catholic Church. The symbolic resources drawn upon for this transformation were diverse, rooted in both Catalan and broader Spanish traditions. During this period, a rivalry developed between the Church and the regime over control of the public narrative, mirroring similar tensions in the populist regimes of Vargas in Brazil and Perón in Argentina. The secular frameworks these regimes used to impose their vision of religion often clashed with institutional Catholicism. In Spain, regional diversity added another layer of friction, as evidenced by sectors of the Catalan Church that emphasized themes of local identity.

The other two chapters, authored by Nicola Riccardi and Jacopo Pili, interconnect the questions of the volume with educational and humanitarian objectives and practices. Riccardi analyses educational policies during the government of Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945) highlights the central role that education played as a tool for national cohesion and political legitimization. During this period, the Catholic Church, backed by its deep-rooted presence and strong ideological support, seized the opportunity to reaffirm its role within Brazilian society, significantly influencing the educational agenda. The reforms implemented by Vargas – particularly the Campos Reform and the subsequent initiatives promoted by Gustavo Capanema – represent a delicate compromise between the secular demands of the *escolanovista* movement and the claims of the Catholic clergy. On the one hand, the Church achieved important successes, such as the introduction of religious education in schools and the recognition of its educational role. On the other hand, the government retained centralized control over the school system, adopting a nationalist vision that incorporated – but did not subordinate – Catholic values. This balance reflects the intrinsic contradictions of the *Varguista* regime, which governed through a heterogeneous coalition and had to respond to opposing pressures from both conservative and more progressive groups. Education thus became a space for mediation.

Jacopo Pili's essay describes the humanitarian activity carried out by the Apostolic Nunciature in Argentina during the crucial period of the 1940s and early 1950s. Drawing on previously underexplored materials from the Vatican archives, Pili reconstructs how the Holy See responded to challenges posed by global conflict, political realignment and social change. The chapter situates humanitarian diplomacy within the broader strategic framework of Vatican foreign policy, particularly in a country where, unlike other Latin American contexts, no formal concordat had been established. The Concordat system, successfully developed in Central and Eastern Europe by Secretary of State Pietro Gasparri in the post-World War I period, proved less effective in Latin America, prompting Vatican diplomacy to explore alternative

means to promote its interests in the region, among them humanitarian engagement. Through this channel, the Vatican sought not only to provide material assistance to European refugees, prisoners of war, and displaced persons arriving in Argentina, but also to strengthen its moral authority in a context marked by ideological polarization and religious pluralism. The Church's adversaries were not limited to communists and socialists, but included anticlerical liberals who pushed for secularization, as well as increasingly active Protestant denominations. Against this backdrop, the Holy See mobilized its charitable initiatives as a form of soft diplomacy – aimed at reinforcing Catholic visibility, cultivating political goodwill, and countering the influence of competing forces. Pili's chapter thus sheds light on how religious humanitarianism became a vehicle for managing the ambiguities of the Vatican's relationship with Peronism, offering a nuanced case study of how the Church adapted its strategies when traditional diplomatic instruments proved insufficient.

To conclude we hope that this volume, through multilingual chapters based on an extensive corpus of institutional, press, private records, will contribute to the transnational debate among scholars from different academic backgrounds on phenomena that continue to raise and animate fundamental questions about religion and politics in the global public sphere.