

Perón under Vatican Scrutiny: Perspectives and Tensions in the Early Days of Peronism

1. Introduction

The Catholic Church has been and continues to be a fundamental political actor on the global stage. As an extremely complex and heterogeneous institution, it has harboured countless currents, ideas, and trends within its structure. During the papacy of Pius XII (1939-1958), the Vatican established around eighty nunciatures, demonstrating its significant global presence¹. In Argentina, as in many other countries worldwide, it has been a powerful force, influencing the country's political trajectory and playing a significant role in both the rise and fall of various governments.

This article aims to contribute to the existing body of research on the relationship between the Vatican and Peronism by examining the Vatican's perspective on the emergence of Peronism and

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¹ S. Unger-Alvi, N. Valbousquet (eds.), *The Global Pontificate of Pius XII: War and Genocide, Reconstruction and Change, 1939-1958*, New York, Berghahn, 2024.

the first years of Juan Domingo Perón's government (1945-1948). Although this period has been extensively studied², there are still unexplored areas where new questions can be raised and new problems can be brought to light.

Existing studies have focused on how various sectors of Argentine Catholicism evaluated and interacted with politics from Perón's rise to power and the early years of his government; specifically, Catholic nationalism, liberal sectors, social Catholics, and the episcopate³. However, there has been no in-depth exploration of the Vatican's perspective, as reflected in diplomatic reports by its representatives.

In this study, I address this gap by examining the Vatican's view of Perón and his government during the period of his emergence and consolidation as a mass political leader. Specifically, I will explore the following questions: What was the Holy See's view of Perón and, subsequently, of his government, in the period of his emergence and consolidation as a mass political leader? What were the main points of agreement, concerns, and reservations?

To answer these questions, I will delve into the materials contained in the Vatican archives, more specifically in the Secretariat of State and the Apostolic Archives, during the papacy of Pius XII, which have been recently opened. The documents related to Argentina are extremely rich for reconstructing the positions adopted by the Holy See towards a phenomenon that was both attractive and disconcerting: Perón was a leader who gave numerous external signs of Catholicism, openly expressed his opposition to communism, his attachment to social Catholicism, and at the same time led a government that, for the opposition

² For example: L. Zanatta, *Perón y el mito de la nación católica: Iglesia y Ejército en los orígenes del peronismo (1943-1946)*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1999; R. Di Stefano, L. Zanatta, *Historia de la Iglesia argentina: desde la Conquista hasta fines del siglo XX*, Buenos Aires, Grijalbo Mondadori, 2000; S. Bianchi, *Catolicismo y peronismo: religión y política en la Argentina (1943-1955)*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo/IEHS, 2001; L. Caimari, *Perón y la Iglesia católica: religión, Estado y sociedad en la Argentina, 1943-1955*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 2010; M. Lida, *Historia del catolicismo en la Argentina entre el siglo XIX y el XX*, Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2015.

³ Caimari, *Perón y la Iglesia católica*, cit.

sectors, could be associated with forms of totalitarianism⁴. This peculiar picture did not fail to attract the attention of the Vatican authorities, who closely monitored the political developments of the country through their nuncios⁵ and other informants.

Among the issues that concerned the Catholic Church in relation to Peronism, it is possible to identify some of a global nature, that is, that were a cause of concern in all countries where the Church had representation: the advance of communism, secularism, and the fight for religious education. All of these had their counterpart in Argentina. Others, on the other hand, were specifically related to matters of a personal and moral nature: the personality of Perón and, above all, the figure of his new wife, Eva Duarte, as a «potential threat» to the stability of the government.

Although the relationship between Perón and the Church during the early years of his presidency was generally harmonious, a closer examination reveals a more complex dynamic. As part of his duties, Papal Nuncio Giuseppe Fietta regularly reported to the Vatican Secretariat of State on the political and religious situation in Argentina. While initial assessments were generally positive towards Perón and his Justicialist movement, undercurrents of distrust and dissatisfaction soon emerged.

To begin, I will briefly address Perón's rise to power, his election to the presidency, and the Vatican's interest in following the political and religious situation in Argentina. I will then analyse nuncio Fietta's reports, focusing on two pivotal moments: the 1946

⁴ The concept of totalitarianism and its application to Peronism has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis. Several works provide valuable insights into the diverse perspectives of various opposition sectors on this issue, for example: R. Martínez Mazzola, *Nacionalismo, peronismo, comunismo: los usos del totalitarismo en el discurso del partido socialista argentino (1946-1953)*, in «Prismas» 15, 2011, 1, pp. 105-125; A. Bisso, *El uso del concepto "Totalitarismo" en la ensayística antiperonista: el caso de Frente al Totalitarismo Peronista, de Reynaldo Pastor*, in «Quinto Sol», 21, 2017, 1, pp. 1-21; J. Nállim, *El "totalitarismo peronista". Redes transnacionales y antiperonismo en las décadas de 1940 y 1950*, in M. Vicente, M. López Cantera (eds.), *La Argentina y el siglo del totalitarismo. Usos locales de un debate internacional*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo Libros, 2022, pp. 55-80.

⁵ During the period under consideration, the nuncio was Giuseppe Fietta, who held that position between 1936 and 1953.

presidential elections, which marked Perón's electoral victory, and the 1948 legislative elections, which solidified his political power.

2. Perón's Rise to Power and the Vatican's Interest

On June 4, 1943, in Argentina, a military coup brought General Pedro Pablo Ramírez to power, followed by General Arturo Rawson and then General Edelmiro Farrell. The «June Revolution», orchestrated by the nationalist military group GOU, was supported by various sectors, including the Catholic Church⁶. The new de facto government was established in the name of a series of values founded on Catholic nationalism, such as the fight against the democratic system, the proscription of political parties, anti-liberalism, and a virulent anti-communism. All of this was accompanied by censorship of the press and radio, and the imposition of a state of siege, which led to severe repression of civil and political liberties and the dissolution of political parties; in short, to the consolidation of an authoritarian regime.

In this context, a meteoric political rise began for a member of the GOU, Colonel Juan Domingo Perón. Initially, he was in charge of the National Department of Labour, which soon became the Secretariat of Labour and Welfare. From this position, he gained increasing visibility for his work reforming labour legislation, based on the support of a strong state, aimed at improving the conditions of the working class and avoiding agitations from the extreme left. During Perón's years in office, these sectors achieved numerous conquests: paid vacations, extension of social security, and Sunday rest, among others. The class struggle, a symbol of the demands of the left, was to be replaced by harmony, in close relation to the predominance of a corporatist vision of labour relations.

Starting in 1944, Colonel Perón added the position of Minister of War in March and Vice President of the Nation in July to his

⁶ Zanatta, *Perón y el mito de la nación católica*, cit.

role in the Secretariat of Labour and Welfare. His ascent seemed unstoppable. However, the de facto government entered into crisis in 1945; it had maintained neutrality in World War II, a position that President Farrell was forced to abandon in March 1945, when the Allied victory was imminent. Also, Perón's growing popularity began to pose a problem for some sectors of the Armed Forces, as well as for opposition forces. In this complex scenario, opposition sectors began to gain ground and pressure for elections.

In this critical context, Perón was forced to resign from all his positions by opposing factions of the Army; on October 13, 1945, he was arrested and taken to Martín García Island, 48 km from the city of Buenos Aires. On the 17th of the same month, a massive workers' demonstration filled the city centre to demand his release. The government had no choice but to yield to the demand: Perón returned and gave a speech from the Casa Rosada before a huge crowd. Moreover, elections were now inevitable. They were scheduled for February 1946.

October 17, 1945 marked a turning point in Argentine history by consolidating Juan Domingo Perón as an undisputed leader and giving rise to Peronism as a political movement. The new Labour Party⁷ formed around him and put him forward as a candidate for the presidential election, which he won by a wide margin⁸ against the coalition of opposition forces centred around the Unión Democrática (UD). Perón assumed the presidency on June 4, 1946. In 1952, he was re-elected and remained in power until a new coup overthrew him in September 1955, with an active role of the Catholic Church.

The political events in Argentina were of great interest to the Vatican Secretary of State, which maintained frequent communications with its diplomatic representative. On several occasions, its authorities sent specific requests to the nuncio to forward

⁷ The Labour Party was created as an expression of the labour movement in the aftermath of the October 17, 1945 events, with the specific goal of supporting Perón's presidential candidacy the following year.

⁸ Perón, as candidate for the Labour Party, obtained 53.71%, while José Tamborini, for the UD, obtained 45.65%.

various publications. For example, on January 29, 1947, a request was made to receive reviews and newspapers; «Criterio» review and «El Pueblo» newspaper, the most important Catholic publications of the period, were indicated as priorities. Furthermore, «La Nación» newspaper was also requested. Meanwhile, on August 9, 1947, Fietta was asked to send, in addition to the aforementioned publications, the session records of the Senate, regarding those issues «which in any way may interest this Office»⁹. The interest in the development of Perón's government, national political dynamics, and the destiny of Argentine Catholicism was, therefore, evident.

3. The 1946 Presidential Elections and Perón's Assumption of Office

Since the 1943 coup, the Church had been intimately linked to the fate of the «June revolution»¹⁰. Although with nuances and differences among the sectors of such a homogeneous actor, in general lines, it can be affirmed that the Argentine Church was a pillar of the military government. One of the main reasons for this support was the issuance of Decree No. 18,411 of December 31, 1943, which was enacted as law during Perón's government in 1947. This decree introduced the teaching of the Catholic religion in public schools. As Caimari affirms, the issue of religious education was predominant in directing the sympathies of the Argentine Catholic Church; all political parties knew that maintaining this decree was a *sine qua non* condition to have its approval. Religious education was a long-standing struggle of the Church at a global level, which was achieving success in some countries while encountering significant opposition in others.

⁹ Città del Vaticano, Archivio Storico della Segreteria di Stato, Sezione per i Rapporti con gli Stati e le Organizzazioni Internazionali (ASRS), Fondo Congregazione degli Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari (AA.EE.SS.), Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 384, f. 518r.

¹⁰ Zanatta, *Perón y el mito de la nación católica*, cit.

Furthermore, the Church favourably viewed another aspect of the military government: the social policies of then-Colonel Perón, designed to «immunize» the working class against communism. For both the Church and Perón, a robust social justice programme was essential to defeat communism and nationalise the proletariat¹¹.

In the context of the February 24, 1946 elections, it was crucial for the Argentine Church that the coalition united around the UD did not come to power. Among its components were the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Radical Civic Union, and conservative parties, and it had the support of Spruille Braden, the US ambassador to Argentina. Collectively, these forces were identified as anti-clerical; the Argentine ecclesiastical hierarchy feared that, if they came to power, they would diminish the role of the Church and take away the benefits it had obtained, such as the mandatory teaching of Catholicism in public schools, the main struggle that occupied its members during this period. For these reasons, there was tacit support for Peronism. In a report prepared by the Vatican on the Argentine political situation, drafted by one of its authorities, it was stated that «The Peronist solution, GIVEN THE ABSENCE OF A CATHOLIC-INSPIRED PARTY, was the least worst option, considering that the traditional Radical Party was in league with socialism and communism, and the Democratic Party was insignificant»¹². However, the Peronist option was more than just the «lesser evil» for the Argentine clergy; the reservations that its members often expressed were the nuances of a widely predominant approval¹³.

Along the same lines, the nuncio expressed his opinions and concerns to the leadership of the Secretariat of State of the Holy See. Communism had to be kept from power at all costs. According to Unger-Alvi and Valbousquet¹⁴, in the con-

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 373, f. 7r. The capitalisation is original to the source.

¹³ Caimari, *Perón y la Iglesia Católica*, cit.

¹⁴ Unger-Alvi, Valbousquet, *The global pontificate of Pius XII*, cit.

text of the Cold War, which divided the world into two blocs, the capitalist – centred around the United States – and the communist – centred around the Soviet Union –, the Vatican maintained itself as a transnational power that, in a way, hovered above the conflict and avoided taking sides. Nevertheless, as these authors point out, it was far from being a neutral actor: the Holy See played an important role in the fight against communism¹⁵ and in the search for its containment around the world. Latin America, without a doubt, was a crucial stage in this battle. In Argentina, since the 1930s, the Catholic Church became a bastion of anti-communism¹⁶.

On the Peronist side, the electoral coalition that came to power in 1946 included numerous openly anti-communist actors, such as members of the Catholic Church and the Armed Forces, who saw the need to defeat «demoliberalism» and communism, considered mortal enemies of the Argentine nation¹⁷. Although it changed over the years, anti-communism was a very significant feature within the ideological corpus of Peronism¹⁸: its military, nationalist, and religious origins, according to Omar Acha¹⁹, were decisive for this. Perón viewed communism as a foreign ideology incompatible with Christianity²⁰. From the beginning of his government, persecutions of workers and left-wing, non-Peronist unions were widespread in the country.

¹⁵ In 1937, Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical «Divini Redemptoris», in which, for the first time, the Catholic Church explicitly condemned «atheistic and materialistic» communism, whose vision of society conflicted with Christian values. Subsequently, in a decree of the Congregation of the Holy Office published on July 1, 1949, and approved by Pius XII, communists were excommunicated and both membership in the Italian Communist Party and any form of support for it were declared illicit.

¹⁶ E. Bohoslavsky, M. Franco, *Fantasmas rojos. El anticomunismo en la Argentina del siglo XX*, Buenos Aires, UNSAM EDITA, 2024.

¹⁷ E. Bohoslavsky, *Organizaciones y prácticas anticomunistas en Argentina y Brasil (1945-1966)*, in «Estudios Ibero-Americanos», 42, 2016, 1, pp. 34-52.

¹⁸ On anti-communism in Peronism, see: O. Acha, *El peronismo y la forja del anticomunismo obrero*, in *IV Congreso de estudios sobre el peronismo (1943-2014)*, San Miguel de Tucumán, s.e., 2014; Bohoslavsky, *Organizaciones y prácticas anticomunistas*, cit.

¹⁹ Acha, *El peronismo y la forja del anticomunismo obrero*, cit.

²⁰ Zanatta, *Perón y el mito de la nación católica*, cit.

In line with the actions of the de facto government of the «June Revolution», Peronism confronted communism in the trade union and electoral arenas. The policies aimed at improving the working class's conditions that Perón promoted since assuming his role in the Secretariat of Labour and Welfare and the preponderance of social justice in his government programme generated a situation of dispute for the support of these sectors. The evident continuity with respect to the previous government was viewed positively by the nuncio.

The first Fietta report I will analyse, dated May 16, 1946, contains valuable information to delve into his perspective on the electoral situation. In addition to providing a detailed description of the composition of the competing coalitions and the results of the vote, the nuncio offers possible explanations for the landslide victory of the Perón-Quijano ticket²¹. He outlines the government programme and points out that a «return to normality» is foreseen, although this «seems rather to represent a continuation of the military movement of June 4, 1943»²².

As I have mentioned, the agreement between the de facto government and the Catholic Church was evident, which is why the nuncio states that, in the realm of religion, the Labour Party «has not yet made known that it has a specific programme. If one takes into account the actions of the current government, of which, as has been said, the new rulers will be the continuation, there would be no reason for greater concern»²³. Perón, as the common thread between both government experiences, seemed to guarantee a certain tranquillity to Fietta, as long as he remained on the same line as in previous years.

However, the nuncio warns of a potential danger due to the previous membership of several members of the victorious party

²¹ Juan Hortensio Quijano, a member of the Radical Civic Union, served as Interior Minister under President Farrell and was Perón's vice presidential candidate in both the 1946 and 1952 elections. He held the position of Vice President from 1946 until his passing in 1952.

²² ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 373, f. 113r.

²³ Ivi, f. 113v.

in socialism and communism – who had been won over by Perón to his ranks. He expresses a certain fear of the possibility that, with the Labour Party in the majority in both chambers, these politicians could promote «anti-clerical laws», such as divorce, or intervene in the appointment of bishops in order to favour priests who had supported Peronism during the campaign.

Additionally, the nuncio addresses another concern of the Vatican: the accusations of totalitarianism that were already being levelled against the government just months after the election. However, Fietta does not endorse these criticisms but attributes them to the opposition:

most of them insist on describing the new President as «totalitarian» based on his self-proclaimed title of «condottiere» and strive to find parallels with extinct European dictatorships by searching for their corresponding «body of doctrine» in his past speeches, a task that will not be easy²⁴.

Fietta's disagreement with the accusations linking Perón to European fascism is. At this point, his opinion of Perón was favourable, as the following passages, which focus on the president's personal characteristics, reveal: «Personally, Colonel Juan D. Perón is a balanced, serious man, although somewhat ambitious and quite cultured. His opponents, on the other hand, see in him the typical characteristics of a megalomaniac bordering on madness»²⁵. Fietta again avoids directly criticising Perón, instead attributing the accusations to his opponents.

Fietta goes on to describe his early life, emphasizing his intelligence and academic aptitude. He reports that Perón was top of his class at the Military Academy. Regarding his military career, he adds that he was «a teacher at the War School, Military Attaché in various South American republics and then also in Berlin and Rome, where he had the opportunity to study the organisation of National Socialism and Fascism, not hiding his sympathy for

²⁴ ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 373, f. 114r.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

these forms of government»²⁶. While he had previously alluded to the opposition's attempts to find fascist elements in Perón's speeches and found them lacking, here he explicitly acknowledges Perón's sympathy for fascist regimes. However, it does not appear as a criticism, but rather as a given fact, not necessarily relevant. Subsequently, he mentions that he was one of the promoters of the June 1943 coup and that, since then, he became practically the arbiter of the political situation, although he was primarily concerned with social issues. This put him in close contact with the masses, who would eventually become his supporters.

Of particular interest to the Vatican, and extensively discussed in the report, is the question of Perón's Catholic affiliation. Fietta elaborates on this point as follows:

Raised as a Christian in a college run by priests, he later abandoned religious practices *but the good foundation remains and he is respectful towards the Church*. After his appointment as President of the Republic, he publicly received Holy Communion together with other officers and soldiers on the occasion of a military feast, and with the First Lady participated in the solemn pilgrimage that the archdiocese of Buenos Aires organises annually to the Shrine of Our Lady of Luján²⁷.

Perón's abandonment of religious practices is relegated to the background, overshadowed by positive assessments linked to his Catholic origins, his respect for the Church and the sacraments. His participation in the pilgrimage to the Basilica of Luján²⁸ at the end of his presidential campaign and the gesture of having taken public communion after taking office are highlighted as signs of

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Ivi, f. 114v. The italics are by the author.

²⁸ The cult of the Virgin of Luján, dating back to the late 19th century, was promoted during the Peronist years. The aim was to connect with the people and local culture, distancing itself from fundamentalist tendencies. On the cult of the Virgin of Luján and its history, see: R. Di Stefano, D. Mauro, *La Virgen de Luján. Identidad nacional y prácticas devocionales*, in D. Mauro, *Devociones marianas: catolicismos locales y globales en la Argentina desde el siglo XIX a la actualidad*, Rosario, Prohistoria, 2021.

outward expression of faith, as gestures of goodwill towards the Church. As Susana Bianchi²⁹ notes, from his presidential campaign onward, Perón began to exhibit previously unseen levels of religious devotion. His rhetoric also shifted, moving away from the strongly secular tone of 1943 and early 1944, to emphasize the Christian foundations of his political programme. It is worth noting, as I will discuss in more detail later, that these overt displays of Catholic faith were sometimes seen as excessive, and therefore led to questions about their sincerity.

Additionally, Fietta highlights a particular concern for the Vatican: Eva Duarte. He notes that Perón had recently remarried a «radio actress» after the death of his first wife at a young age. The report expresses apprehension, stating: «It is a pity that this woman, very worldly and not very religious, exercises an almost absolute influence over her husband, which could seriously damage his work of government»³⁰.

The portrayal of the First Lady as a worldly, distant from religion, manipulative woman, capable of bending her husband's will persisted until her death. This perception intensified as Eva's political influence grew, particularly through the Eva Perón Foundation³¹. These views reflect the Catholic Church's traditional gender roles and moral standards at the time. Her career as an actress and perceived lack of religious devotion were seen as threats to the conservative Catholic society the Church aimed to establish.

In his report of June 14, 1946, regarding the inauguration of Perón as President of the Nation, which took place on the 4th of that month, the nuncio Giuseppe Fietta provides a detailed account of the events surrounding the occasion: the invited guests, including diplomatic missions sent from various countries, the special receptions arranged by the new government, and the formal acts

²⁹ S. Bianchi, *Catolicismo y peronismo: la religión como campo de conflicto (Argentina, 1945-1955)*, in «Boletín americanista», 44, 1994, pp. 25-37.

³⁰ ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 373, f. 114v.

³¹ On the Eva Perón Foundation, see: C. Barry, K. Ramacciotti, A. Valobra (eds.), *La Fundación Eva Perón y las mujeres: entre la provocación y la inclusión*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2008.

of the day. He mentions the transfer of power between Farrell and Perón, the swearing-in of the cabinet, and the parade of the national Armed Forces, along with the crews of foreign warships. The nuncio also notes that the workers' masses gathered in front of the Casa Rosada were cheering for Perón, who responded from the balcony with brief and cordial words of greeting and thanks «to the workers for the magnificent display of affection they had shown him, and renewing his promise to work tirelessly, from his new position, for the welfare of the working class»³².

However, the most crucial point for the Vatican is the last one in the report. The nuncio informed that, on the day following Perón's inauguration, the Foreign Ministry announced the resumption of diplomatic relations with Russia, severed since the October Revolution. This news, while unsurprising due to the presence of a Soviet economic mission that had been well-received in Buenos Aires, undoubtedly drew significant attention.

The primary concern here is the relationship with the communist power, a key player in the ongoing Cold War. Nonetheless, the nuncio reported having a conversation with the president, who assured him that the reestablishment of relations with Russia:

does not equate to favouring communist propaganda in the country. The anti-communist attitude that the Government has maintained before and during the political elections will be continued, and the Soviet Embassy will be monitored so that it does not become a centre of propaganda³³.

By making this statement, he anticipates the Vatican's concerns and seeks to reassure them that the government's anti-communist position would remain unchanged, even in light of the potentially alarming resumption of diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union.

³² Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (AAV), Fondo Argentina, Nunziatura di Giuseppe Fietta (1937-1953), Busta 150, 748, pp. 54-59.

³³ AAV, Fondo Argentina, Nunziatura di Giuseppe Fietta (1937-1953), Busta 150, 748, pp. 54-59.

Close to social Catholicism, the new president had numerous gestures of rapprochement with the Catholic Church in his first years of government: he attended pilgrimages and recited social encyclicals; Perón made an unprecedented effort to strengthen the ecclesiastical institution³⁴. In addition, the Virgin of Luján was declared patroness of the Federal Police and Argentine trains, and the government participated in the First National Marian Congress in October 1947, in the city of Luján³⁵.

Nevertheless, despite the enthusiasm these actions generated among Argentine Catholics, they also raised questions among Church representatives from the very beginning of the campaign. These representatives doubted the sincerity of Perón's rapid adoption of Catholic rhetoric³⁶. The nuncio, as evidenced by his report, also had some reservations, although a predisposition towards a new president who presented himself as Catholic and seemed willing to support religious education in schools predominated.

4. The Vatican's Perspective on the 1948 Legislative Elections

The third report I will examine is dated February 17, 1948. In this report, the nuncio discusses the upcoming legislative elections scheduled for March 7th. These elections would determine the composition of the Chamber of Deputies. Under Perón's leadership, the Labour Party had transformed into the Justicialist Party, poised to achieve a landslide victory.

The party secured 56.32% of the vote, far outpacing the Radical Party and the Socialist Party. By this point, Perón had already been in power for nearly two years and had launched the ambitious First

³⁴ Di Stefano, Zanatta, *Historia de la iglesia argentina*, cit.

³⁵ Caimari, *Perón y la Iglesia Católica*, cit.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

Five-Year Plan (1947-1951)³⁷, aimed at transforming Argentina's economy and achieving economic independence.

Moreover, the nuncio's report emphasizes the significance of the forthcoming elections, as they would serve to test to what extent the Justicialist Party still enjoyed the popular support that allowed Perón to «rally the masses simply by stating his social policies»³⁸. In this context, the role of communism was also a source of concern. Fietta suggested that the extent of its success was uncertain, and that party members were actively working through committees made up of non-party members who supported the party's goals.

It is hard not to admit that Communism has gained ground in Buenos Aires over the past two years through a twofold approach to its opposition to Peronism: by attempting to convert Peronists to its cause and by opposing North American imperialism, a tactic that serves as excellent propaganda at this time. However, some argue that this growth of Communism is merely a product of the government's electoral tolerance, which allows opposition parties to operate with a certain degree of freedom. They claim that once the elections are over, General Perón will crush the Communists or at least make it impossible for them to undertake any significant actions³⁹.

The nuncio was alarmed by the Communist Party's energetic campaigning and its efforts to win over Peronist voters, and he reported his concerns to the Secretariat of State. In the second part of the quote, he expresses a desire, request, on behalf of «others», to curb the influence of communism, and suggests that Perón would take the necessary steps after the election. Despite this request, it is clear that the nuncio viewed Perón as an ally in the battle against communism in the region.

³⁷ Naturally, the Five-Year Plan did not go unnoticed by the Vatican hierarchy. In fact, on March 24, 1947, monsignor Domenico Tardini, in charge of foreign affairs at the Secretariat of State, sent a letter to Fietta requesting that he send him a copy of the programme's text, along with all the recently enacted laws linked to it (AAV, Fondo Argentina, Nunziatura di Giuseppe Fietta (1937-1953), Busta 191, 891, p. 16).

³⁸ ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 384, f. 473r.

³⁹ Ivi, ff. 474v-475r.

In the aftermath of the 1948 legislative elections, the role of Peronism as a mass party and Perón's position as a prominent political leader were confirmed. As I have previously emphasized, the Justicialist Party achieved a resounding victory.

On April 15, Fietta sent a detailed report on the elections, including voter turnout, prior expectations of a Peronist victory, and the opposition's mistakes – such as presenting themselves in various political options rather than united. The nuncio noted a decline in support for opposition parties, contrasting this with the growth of Peronism. He also points out that they have been deprived of their «attack» press organs, referring specifically to the newspaper «La Vanguardia» of the Socialist Party and the weekly review *Argentina Libre*⁴⁰, a publication within the liberal-socialist and anti-fascist framework, opposed to Peronism⁴¹.

He also mentions one of the Communist Party's publications, the newspaper «La Hora»⁴², describing it as «the newspaper of the discontented, or of those who see Russia as the only acceptable model, a strategy that is unlikely to win many readers in Argentina»⁴³. Despite their well-organised propaganda, the communists failed to achieve the results they had hoped for, and which «others had feared»⁴⁴. These «others» contained large sectors of the Catholic Church, including the Vatican, whose anti-communist stance I have previously discussed.

⁴⁰ Regarding this press, Fietta asserts that «it always served to hurt the easy sensibilities of the ruling class by highlighting its weaknesses and seeking every way to discredit it» (ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 384, ff. 337v-338r).

⁴¹ A. Bisso, *Argentina libre y antinazi: dos revistas en torno de una propuesta político-cultural sobre el antifascismo argentino 1940-1946*, in «Temas de Nuestra América Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos», 25, 2009, 47, pp. 63-84.

⁴² The newspaper «La Hora» was prohibited between 1943 and late 1945 by the government of the "1943 Revolution". Although it resumed publication, it was once again targeted and silenced between late 1949 and early 1950 by the Peronist government. See: C. Panella, M. Fonticelli, *La prensa de izquierda y el peronismo (1943-1949): socialistas y comunistas frente a Perón*, La Plata, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2007.

⁴³ ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 384, f. 338r.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

The nuncio also references a document distributed by the Argentine Church during the elections, outlining voting guidelines for the faithful. Under the guise of supposed impartiality, its content «allows one to deduce, by exclusion and, I would say, almost against the will of the writers, that, except for Peronism, the large traditional parties, including of course communism, cannot be voted for»⁴⁵. What were the reasons for these indications? Fietta offers a clear answer:

... all parties, except the Peronist party, proposed to suppress the teaching of Religion or to introduce civil divorce or to advocate for the separation of Church and State or, finally, to suppress the words contained in the preamble of the Constitution that invoke the «Protection of God, source of all reason and Justice»⁴⁶.

This fragment of Fietta's report clearly indicates support for Peronism. This perspective, which presents Peronism as the only viable option or the «lesser evil» compared to other, more anti-clerical alternatives, also influenced the presidential elections. He adds that, surely, the document would have been a final blow to those sectors that, although anti-Peronist, usually followed the precepts of the Catholic Church. According to him, it is very likely that it would have conditioned the decision of these voters, or led to an increase in blank ballots.

In 1948, there was speculation about a constitutional reform to be implemented the following year, with the goal of revising the 1853 Constitution. Given their majority in both houses of Congress, the Peronists were likely to succeed in this endeavour. If this were to happen «it is to be hoped that they will not fail to meet the full recognition of the rights of the Church in Argentina. But since traces of a musty regalism still exist, there would be a need for an energetic intervention by the President to achieve

⁴⁵ ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 384, f. 338v.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

the desired effect»⁴⁷. The nuncio's statements reveal a somewhat ambiguous stance towards the new president. He also expresses a certain level of distrust regarding Perón's willingness to intervene on behalf of the Church, which was crucial for obtaining the State's support.

Finally, in this report we find another mention of Eva Duarte, although not in the same tone as the previous one. Just a year earlier, in September 1947, the women's suffrage law was passed, granting women the right to vote and to be elected. Its implementation took a considerable amount of time, and it was only materialized in the 1951 presidential elections. Therefore, the nuncio refers that, if in 1948 women had already had access to the vote, surely Peronist victory would have been even greater, considering that «Mrs. Perón, among her many activities, does not at all neglect that of keeping in constant contact with the female popular element»⁴⁸. The wide female support for the president's wife did not go unnoticed by Fietta, although he chose not to comment on it on this occasion.

Di Stefano and Zanatta⁴⁹ argue that 1949 marked a turning point in the relationship between the Catholic Church and Peronism. The constitutional reform of that year triggered a major conflict between the two, primarily over the Vatican's demands to end the State's patronage of the Church and to establish a concordat. These demands were ultimately rejected in the new Constitution⁵⁰. In fact, by late 1948, as the constitutional reform approached, the nuncio's opinions began to harden; the mild and often veiled criticisms in earlier reports were now more explicit. Relations between Fietta and Perón deteriorated, turning more hostile. In a November 25 report, the nuncio argued that the system was veering towards de facto totalitarianism and condemned

⁴⁷ Ivi, f. 343r.

⁴⁸ Ivi, f. 337v.

⁴⁹ Di Stefano, Zanatta, *Historia de la Iglesia argentina*, cit.

⁵⁰ The documentation contained in the Vatican archives relating to the issue of the 1949 constitutional reform is very rich and abundant. However, its analysis goes beyond the scope of this essay.

the presence of socialists and radicals in the president's inner circle. He described Perón as highly suggestible, with a variable and contradictory personality, more driven by temperament than logic, and guided by intuition rather than reason, making him unpredictable⁵¹. However, while this was a moment of peak tension in the relationship between Peronism and the Catholic Church, the following years did not represent a straightforward decline that inevitably led to the conflict that erupted in 1954-1955. The final rupture stemmed from a more complex set of factors that lie beyond the scope of this paper and have been extensively explored in other works⁵².

Yet, these criticisms are directed at Eva Duarte, who is blamed for the government's missteps in several areas and for the increasing tensions with the Church. Fietta expresses concern over his «political hypersensitivity», which becomes very worrying «when the President's wife comes into play. Unfortunately, at the present time, there is no problem for which, in one way or another, openly or behind the scenes, we do not have to deal with the First Lady»⁵³. The nuncio condemns her increasing power within the government, her hostility towards the Church hierarchy, and worries that she was becoming «prey to anti-clerical sentiments». These are fuelled by her lack of religious belief and her distrust of the higher clergy, who she saw as aligned with the «oligarchies» that Peronism opposed.

However, the Vatican authorities did not only receive the opinions of the nuncios – although these were surely held in the highest esteem – but other voices also resonated there. In fact, these often contradicted Fietta's views. The Secretariat of State

⁵¹ AAV, Fondo Argentina, Nunziatura di Giuseppe Fietta (1937-1953), Busta 191, 891, ff. 95-100.

⁵² For a summary on the different positions on the conflict between the Church and Peronism, see, M. Lida, *Catolicismo y peronismo: debates, problemas, preguntas*, in «Boletín del Instituto de Historia Argentina y Americana Dr. Emilio Ravignani», 27, 2005, pp. 139-148. It should be noted that the Vatican archives could also contribute to shedding light on other aspects of these disputes. However, I believe that this issue deserves a separate study.

⁵³ ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Periodo V, Parte I, Argentina, pos. 391, f. 345v.

received and analysed a diverse array of information to form its own assessment of the political and religious landscape of the country. Notably, some of these reports were highly critical of Peronism, contrasting sharply with the nuncio's initially more lenient stance towards the new government.

5. Conclusions

Several conclusions about the Vatican's perspective on Perón and his early administration can be drawn from the analysis conducted thus far. Firstly, the Vatican demonstrated a great interest in carrying out a detailed follow-up of political and religious events in Argentina. The period encompassing Perón's rise to power and his initial years in office was no exception.

Secondly, in the context of the 1946 presidential election, Fietta exhibited a rather accommodating stance towards Peronism. He emphasized continuity with the previous *de facto* government, praising it and attributing potential criticisms to the opposition. Furthermore, his discourse highlighted the importance of anti-communism for the Catholic Church and expressed a strong aversion to Eva Perón. In his second report, following Perón's inauguration, Fietta addressed the resumption of diplomatic relations with Russia, downplaying concerns about Soviet interference by reaffirming Perón's anti-communist stance.

In the context of the 1948 legislative elections, Fietta's reports expressed growing concern about the Communist Party's activities and called for a stronger government response. The reports portrayed the president as an ally in a shared struggle. Additionally, 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 favourable view of Perón and his administration gave way to more overt 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. Additionally, he portrayed the president as a malleable figure, easily influenced by his wife.

In conclusion, the primary concern of the Vatican during this period, as evidenced in the nuncio Fietta's communications, was communism. The rise of secularism and the debate surrounding religious education were also significant. Initially, 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 of the development of his first years in government. By late 1948, on the eve of the constitutional reform, the nuncio's opinion of Perón had become markedly more critical.

