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# The geopolitics of the Catholic Church in Latin America

Andrés Rivarola Puntigliano 

## ABSTRACT

This study analyses the geopolitical dimension of the Catholic Church's activity in Latin America. This involves ideas related to political control, administration and power over territory. It is also related to the pastoral activity of the Church. As shown, the geopolitics of the Church is related to its internal organization as well as in its relations with states and society. The creation and adaptation of geopolitical visions are made through internal processes in connection with political and cultural forces around the Church. This is identified as the religeopolitical scope of the Catholic Church, analysed in this study from a long-term perspective. During colonial times, the geopolitical vision was linked to consolidating global imperial structures. After the shock of the independence period, there was a reconnection to the new states and a reconstruction of geopolitical visions that in time was transformed into a Latin American 'continental' vision. Along this line, the study explores the contemporary confluence between the Catholic Church and geopolitics through ideas and conceptual frameworks such as the *Patria Grande*. Issues such as regional integration, popular theology and Catholic social commitment are presented as core elements of the Church's geopolitics in Latin America.

## KEYWORDS

Catholic Church; Latin America; geopolitics; continentalism; regional integration

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## INTRODUCTION

As one of the longest-standing organizations in the 'Western' world, the Catholic Church has 'harnessed together the confessional space of a privileged access to the sacred with the more worldly, and profane, association of the Church with the Roman universalism of the *imperium populi romani*' (Agnew, 2010, p. 40). This has several implications, geopolitics being one of them. The intention here is to analyse the roots and shifts of the Catholic Church's geopolitical visions and actions towards Latin America, in the framework of its global geopolitical visions. As addressed in this paper, the Church's geopolitical conception of Latin America was initiated by a territorial scope linked to the Iberian Empire, in the framework of a global pan-Hispanic project. This was followed by a deterritorialized interlude during the mid-19th century, after the emancipation processes across the American continent. During the latter part of the 19th century, the Church began a renewed process of reterritorialization where new geopolitical visions began to take form. One of the most important of these was the creation of a regional 'continentalist' scope, conceived within the framework of new forms of global governance.

## CONTACT

 andres.rivarola@lai.su.se

Institute of Latin American Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden.

By 'geopolitical', the paper refers to the territorial dimension of political control, power and the administration of a community. In this definition, 'political control' is linked to the political systems through which a territory is governed. 'Administration' refers to the organizational control of territory, from minor local units to broader ones such as empires or regions. With regard to 'power', it is seen here as relational, following Dahl (1957, p. 203). In this case, the word refers to the dominant forces over political structures, administration(s) and the people(s) within particular territories. The power expressed in the geopolitical outlook of the Catholic Church can be identified along two dimensions: on the one hand, what Agnew (2010, p. 42) calls a *Machiavellian* dimension, with an emphasis on political stagecraft and performance, or what in International Relations theory would be seen as a 'realist' dimension of governance; and, on the other, the Foucauldian perspective on 'governmentality', where to 'rule' is not the same as to 'govern'. The most relevant issue here is not the state's takeover (*étatisation*) of society, but the 'governmentalization' of the state (Foucault, 2009, p. 139). Along these lines, the focus here is in what Sturm (2013, p. 135) calls the 'religeopolitical' dimension that, in the present study, will be regarded as the geopolitical outcome of the Church's territorial (spatial) representations in terms of organizational structure, actions and political-theological vocabularies.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins with a historiography of the roots of the Catholic Church's geopolitical thinking. It is argued that, from a historical perspective, the Church's geopolitical path is related to a reconstruction of 'Rome'. The Roman connection is of key importance to understanding the geopolitical dimension of the Church. Many facets of the Roman Empire that the Church later adopted were related to governing tactics and organizational structures aimed at controlling territory. A dimension developed in symbiosis with the empire was related to 'governmentality', which in the case of the Church took the form of its 'pastoral' activity (Foucault, 2009, p. 153). This was pervasive at all levels, from the local parishes to the 'universal' scope of the Holy Pope. A core issue here is a vision of state-making, expressed in the geopolitical idea of a universal 'Christian Empire' (Schmitt, 2003, p. 59).

The third section deals with the first steps in creating a geopolitical programme for the new Iberian Catholic civilization(s) in the American territory. As Burbank and Cooper (2010) contend, due to the resistance found in Europe, it was in America where the Iberian monarchs attempted to do what they could not do at home: 'to rule an empire in a more patrimonial manner' (p. 147). Much of the colonization was directly influenced by visions, ideals and governing tactics having roots in the Roman Empire. As shown here, the Church coagulated in the 'New World' themes of pastoral power with institutions that intended to forge a unity between territory and people at local and 'universal' levels through the so-called *Res publica christiana* and *Populous christianus* (Schmitt, 2003, p. 58).

The fourth section deals with the impact of American emancipation. Identified and organically linked to the Iberian empires, the Church lost much of its former grip as well as the linkage to states that could pursue a global empire. After a period of rethinking and reorganization, new geopolitical visions appeared. One of the most relevant for the future geopolitical projections was 'Latin America'. As explained by Methol Ferré (1972), the Catholic Church needed to resolve one of its central contradictions: to overcome the dilemma between the need to combine the nationalism of its myriad of local churches with fulfilling the universal mission of creating a 'global empire'. A way of dealing with this was to find a meso-level where smaller local geopolitical identities could merge into larger units that could more easily be incorporated in a global structure. In the late 19th century, 'Continentalism' emerged as a geopolitical alternative, forging a connection between local (national and subnational) units with a new global (post-imperial) project.

The fifth section focuses on changes and new elements that appeared during the 20th century, with the emergence of the 'geopolitics of integration' and the consolidation of a Latin American continentalist outlook, for the Church and in the geopolitical outlook of states, political actors and intellectuals.

The final section analyses how the Church's continentalism has continued to evolve in the early 21st century, with an influence on projects of regional integration. A synthesis of this process was the election of the first non-European Pope, the Argentinean Jorge Bergoglio (Pope Francis I, 2013–present). As pointed out, this can be regarded as the result of the formulation of a new geopolitical vision by the Latin American Catholic Church. Beyond this, one finds influential intellectuals such as Alberto Methol Ferré, as well as leading social and political leaders across the region. In their view, Latin America was a geopolitical nation, the home of a united *pueblo* (people) with common ideas of development, anti-imperialism, Christianity and solidarity, which was regarded as a steppingstone towards the construction of a universal state.

## THE PAN-HISPANIC CHURCH

With the collapse of the Roman Empire in Western Europe at the end of the fifth century, the Church became a 'state–church' without a state. It could also be said that it was a church in search of a state at the same time that it became the institution bearing much of the Roman Empire's *acquis*: its administrative and territorial scope, organizational skills and the ideal of a *pax romana*. In this way, the Catholic Church also became a bearer of the legitimacy of the most longstanding and successful political project of the Mediterranean region. In the vacuum of the crumbling empire, the Church provided a common national belonging that could promote coexistence and *pax*. Carrying the powerful 'Roman' legitimacy, the Church participated in the making of new states and provided legal and moral rights for the acquisition of new territories. This began within Europe, as in the case of the incorporation of the non-Christian Iberian lands. It then moved beyond Europe to the rest of the world. In this process, the Church became a leading actor in a kind of national re-creation linked to 'Latinity', that is, a national culture based on the Roman legacy, with strong bonds in terms of language, religion, legal code and social organization.

At the core of the Church's national re-creation was neither a Spanish nor a Portuguese nationality or identity, but the incorporation of souls into the *Res publica Christiana* by making them part of the *Populous Christianus*. The linkage of the Spanish Habsburgs, through Emperor Charles V (1519–56), with the Holy Roman Empire was one of the most outstanding attempts to project Catholicism through the Empire. However, unlike previous attempts, the 'universality' of the new Hispanic-led 'Roman Empire' was not within the territorial fix of Western Europe, but had a global projection. Conquest and integration were inherent elements of the Catholic project, in Europe, in America and beyond. An important step towards the consolidation of a global Catholic Empire was the realization of the old dream of a Hispanic union, through the 'Iberian Union' (1580–1640). This was the designation of the federation between the crowns of Portugal and Spain, through a dynastic union under the Hapsburg Philip III of Spain (1578–1621). This was perhaps the moment of highest splendour for the Iberian-centred Catholic power, as integration was key to consolidating the geopolitical vision of an Iberian-centred Catholic Empire with global scope.

Since the very first steps of Iberian global exploration and colonization, the Church has played an essential role in imperial territorial administration and political control. One of the most important examples was Pope Alexander VI's (1492–1503) edict, *inter caetera divinae*, legitimizing the division of the world into two separate spheres: one for Spain and the other for Portugal. Another was the famous Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). Schmitt (2003) calls these the 'first global line [s]' of history where the two 'Catholic powers agreed that all newly discovered territories west of the line would belong to Spain and those east of the line to Portugal' (p. 4). However, besides broader continental or global visions, the Church was also a down-to-earth organization. Since the very beginning of the colonization process, the territories governed by Spain and Portugal were organized through diverse and complex juridical, political and administrative systems, where the state (Spanish and Portuguese's crowns) and the Church often acted as complementary forces.

One important dimension of the Church was its role as a unifying agency, forging links between centres and peripheries across the American continent, from the Pampas in the south to the North American territories of California and Louisiana. Moreover, the Church was largely behind the broad network of intertwined interests and identities acting across state or provincial boundaries (Azcuy Ameghino & Birocco, 2001, p. 28). There were, for example, numerous indigenous nations that did not identify with any of the imperial states, but had a strong attachment to the Church and the Catholic orders such as the Society of Jesus (the 'Jesuits'). The period of the Iberian Union was a moment of key importance to increase the influence of the Church, benefiting from the collaboration among its members in different parts of the continent (Rivarola Puntigliano & Briceño Ruiz, 2017, p. 7). The missions played a key role here, with administrative jurisdictions that did not really distinguish between souls belonging to Spanish or Portuguese territories. As Martínez Serna (2014, p. 371) points out, the Jesuit presence was crucial for the opening up of new regions and their resources. This could be related to wine production around the Bío Bío River, food and cattle production in Tucuman and Córdoba, and the production of *yerba mate* (also known as Jesuit tea) in Misiones (Martínez Serna, 2014, p. 372). This was just another dimension of the role of the Church as a unifying agent within and across the empires. Concerning territorial control, one should pay special attention to the political control and administration based in the parishes. In the case of the Jesuits, the focus was on rural settlements (*fundaciones*), missions and education centres (*colegios*).

The *Res publica Christiana* in the American societies promoted not only a common nationhood but also a level of cosmopolitanism that was outstanding for its time (Podetti, 2018, pp. 2–3). In many ways, these new territories were at the centre of the geopolitical projection of the empires and the Catholic Church. One example is Mexico City, which became one of the first 'world cities' 'where Europe, Asia and the Americas met' (Gordon & Morales del Pino, 2017, p. 40). From here, the Spanish Empire's trade and administration covered both American and Asian territories (the Philippines). Within this system of global scope, the Church played a complementary and fundamental role in the territorial administration and governmentalization of the imperial state, alongside its own aim of becoming a 'global cultural hegemon' (Agnew, 2010, p. 41). The break-up of the Iberian Union in 1640, and the later expulsion of the Jesuits by Charles III in 1767, were two great blows to this geopolitical project. A third one was related to the period of American independence. According to Lynch (2006, p. 527), 'independence administered a great shock to the Church ... parishes where unattended, Mass and the sacraments no longer available, sermons and instructions discontinued'. The Church's geopolitical structure was severely weakened, but there was a paradox here, since 'in the aftermath of independence the Church was more stable, more popular and apparently more wealthy' than the severely weakened Latin American states (p. 529).

## THE CHURCH AND THE MAKING OF LATIN AMERICA

The consolidation of the new states after independence was a difficult period for the Catholic Church. By the mid-19th century, it had to confront a strong secular pressure from national governments dominated by liberal and agnostic politicians. Nevertheless, even if secularism was strong among the new elites, the masses remained attached to the Church:

few seem to have felt any sense of identity with the new republic and even fewer had any awareness of national identity. The peasants of central Mexico, like the Church, were victims of liberal policy and they resented attacks on communal landholding and other threats of modernization. They were the natural allies of the Church. ... Some of the Indian communities of central Mexico fought for religion against its liberal enemies, or provided indirect support throughout the years of persecution. (Lynch, 2006, p. 539)

During the last quarter of the 19th century, the Church gradually re-emerged, adjusting to the secular state. From the near abandonment of territorial presence, the diocesan seminaries increased in number and the Vatican sought to renew its tools of influence. As Lynch (2006, p. 543) further explains, Rome sought: (1) to retain the nomination of bishops; (2) to develop Catholic media; (3) to retake the pastoral mission across the region; and (4) to strengthen the seminaries where future leaders of the Church were formed. A major step in regard to these goals was made by Pope Pius IX (1846–78) in 1858, when he established the ‘Latin American College’ (*Colegio Pío Latinoamericano* – CPL) in Rome. The Vatican consolidated its grip on the new regional structures, linking them to the reconstruction of its global project. A landmark in this was the First Vatican Council in 1869–70, followed by Pope Leo XIII’s (1878–1903) message encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (from 1891), where he condemned ‘the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class’ (Vázquez & Peterson, 2016, p. 374).

With respect to Latin America, a second pivotal step was taken in 1899, when Leo XIII convoked the first Latin American Plenary Council, with the participation of 13 archbishops and 41 bishops (Lynch, 2006, p. 543). The aim was to improve organization by integrating the Latin American churches with themselves, which would in turn strengthen their relationship to the Vatican, from which they received direction and staff. An important aspect of this reform was to reach the popular sectors, giving priority to rural parishes, creating new frontier-type networks and a new ‘social’ approach. (Lynch, 2006, p. 546). It could be said that the Church that emerged from the secular reforms of the 19th century did so through a ‘Latinamericanizing’ reconstitution. The universal Pan-Hispanic dream had not disappeared. Instead, it became readapted within a particular Latin American continental dimension that was part of a new global approach, without former institutional linkages to empires or national states. In other words, the ‘making’ of regions or continental geopolitical units was a path towards a new global matrix. The creation of CPL was a step in this direction, with an explicit ‘continentalist’ outlook.

To have a ‘continental’ scope was, however, not a new issue. It had roots in colonial times, with the aim of an empire and a *Populous Christianus* dominating the American continent as a whole. Later, continentalism was part of the United States’ geopolitical scope in 1776 and in the initiative to create a continental American *zollverein*, as a step further towards a Pan-American Union (Rivarola Puntigliano, 2016, p. 8). The new thing during the second part of the 19th century was to frame ‘continentalism’ in terms of ‘Latin America’. This was, however, not without problems, since Latin America is a sub-region, not a continent. Nevertheless, even if the continent is America and/or South America (depending on the definition), the new reference to ‘Latin America’ came to be increasingly framed as a ‘continental’ outlook.

A reason for this could be that ‘Latin America’ was not defined from a geographical perspective (certain countries occupying a particular territorial space), but from a national identity. The core of the American *Populous Christianus* was in Latin America, a possible supranational Catholic nation and ‘continental state’. Here is where governmentalization takes a new form, transforming ‘continental’ and ‘Latin America’ into connected ‘isms’. The CPL became a provider of priests and other intellectual profiles behind this view, educated along ‘Roman’ and ‘Latinamericanist’ identities. It was in the premises of the CPL that the Council of 1899 took place, gathering the archbishops and bishops of the Latin American Dioceses, convoked by Leo XIII. The purpose was to unify the ecclesiastical representatives and search for a common continental framework of action (Piccardo, 2012). According to Podetti (2018), this took the episcopal tradition to a new level. It was a major step in the invention of Latin America through a religeopolitical dimension, which began the process of transforming this region (‘continent’) into a geopolitical unit.

The reposition of the Church across the region also implied a state–church rapprochement (Hernández Sandoval, 2016, pp. 350–351). Separated from many states, the Church began to find new forms of connection to society, mobilizing the grassroots through new organizations such as Catholic Action (*Acción Católica*). It differed with existing Catholic movements due to



a broader projection towards different sectors of the population such as university students, workers, intellectuals and peasant communities (Hernández Sandoval, 2016, p. 355). Another Catholic lay movement was the *Cursillos de Cristiandad*, which brought together groups of people for a three-day retreat.

Catholic intellectuals were among the leading names of a new generation, reflecting identity, society and the search for alternatives to dominating economic structures. One finds here people with different ideological outlooks, from the more conservative Peruvian (writer, politician and diplomat) Francisco García Calderón (1883–1953) to the Argentinean socialist writer and political leader Manuel Ugarte (1875–1951). Moreover, the process leading to Latinamericanism went beyond the Church. In fact, one of the most important sources of inspiration for Catholic intellectuals was the Uruguayan thinker José Enrique Rodó (1871–1917). Even if he was not Catholic, Rodó's critique of Anglo-utilitarianist positivism and his elevation of Hispanic spirituality in the face of modernization generated strong support across Latin America. In his bestseller from 1900, *Ariel*, Rodó connected past and future and became recognized as a path breaker in 'giving the Hispanic American identity an unprecedented philosophical depth' (Wiarda, 2001, p. 187). He was also a pathbreaker in the shift from Hispanic American to Latin American identity. In this way, he was a forebearer of the idea of the *Patria Grande* (the great fatherland) that was particularly influential among young intellectuals across the region. This started the so-called *Arielismo* movement, which played an important role in the student activism surrounding the Argentine university reform of 1918 (known as the 'Cordoba movement').

In Mexico, the Minister of Education (1921–24) and President of the Universidad Nacional de México (UNAM) (1920–21), José Vasconcelos, was one of the leading *Arielistas*. He rejected positivism as a 'Spenserian doctrine' in the services of foreign powers intending to control Mexican resources. Along these lines, he upheld the dichotomy of 'Monroism' (referring to the 'Monroe Doctrine') against 'Bolivarianism', the former representing 'Anglo' imperialism and, later, Simon Bolívar's unionist ideals. This greater unity was, according to Vasconcelos, a Hispanic one, through a unifying Catholic faith. In his view, Christianity was not a culture 'but a verb that breeds culture and penetrates the souls and evicts from them any other remnant of belief or superstition' (Vasconcelos, 2007, p. 398).

The continental expansion of Catholic movements and Catholic-linked ideas during the early 20th century took different forms. Appearing as conservative anti-liberal forces in the case of the *Cristero* Rebellion in Mexico (1926–29), they were also a force for social reform, democracy and anti-imperialism. This period also saw the formation of new Christian political parties. Argentina took a first step through the formation of the *Unión Democrática Cristiana* in 1911. Of course, the wide geographic spread of Catholicism, as well as the diversity of ideologies among the *Populous Christianus*, led to internal tensions between more conservative groups linked to traditional elites and those with a closer attachment to the poor masses (*el pueblo*). An influential voice behind the Catholic 'popular' intellectuals was the Chilean writer Gabriela Mistral, who was closely attached to José Vasconcelos and was a strong promoter of the *Patria Grande*. Mistral rejected what she saw as the divorce between Christianity with the popular masses and democracy. Her pledge was for a *reconquista* of Catholic values and the Evangelium, along the path of the 'social issue' and social justice (Mistral, 1924).

In Argentina, this was also the position of Ugarte (1978), who was one of the first to use clearly the concept 'Latin America' as linked to 'continentalism' and to what Devés Valdés (2000, p. 231) called a 'geo-ethnic' national space. One could also add Michel Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia', used to designate a locality marked by difference 'which defy being incorporated into larger meaning systems' (Gerhardt, 2008, p. 913). In the case of 'Latin America', the defying position was towards US or British 'meaning systems'. From different sources and vantage points, new forms of thinking were taking shape as a synergy between cultural and ideological expressions: Catholicism, socialism, as well as conservative and modern outlooks related to society and economy. Common among them

was seeing Latin America as a 'fractioned nationalism' and that only (re) unification could ensure development and the ability to confront the United States and other 'imperialist' big powers.

The *Arielismo*, Ugarte and Vasconcelos influenced the formation of new political expression through which the 'Latinamericanist' continentalist movement gained a more solid political organization. One example was the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA), created in Mexico in 1924 by a group of Peruvian intellectuals and political exiles under the leadership of Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre (1895–1979). The APRA was later established and developed in Peru, where it evolved into a major political party, the first in the continent with Latin American integration and continentalism among its core objectives (Gullo, 2013, pp. 28–29). From Mexico in the north to Argentina in the south, and incorporating the Brazilian giant, there was a growing 'continental' movement asking for policies against poverty, the participation of the masses, as well as a Latin American union against 'imperialism' and foreign exploitation. There were also cleavages and tensions within this movement, which would grow deeper in time, for example, between the Church and the Marxists – particularly after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 – or between the Church and those supporting neo-liberalism and the US-led 'continental' National Security Doctrine. In the new international context of bipolar superpower confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, that is, between capitalism and Communism, the Church took their position along a 'third way'. Here the 'development' issue became central.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF INTEGRATION

The year 1945 has been pointed out as a new moment for the Church, in opening the door to the process leading towards a global *Ecumene* (Methol Ferré, 1987, p. 1). This implied a shift from a European-centred position towards a recognition of the lack of equality among the different continents. That was the case for the Church's own organization as well as for the tangible core and periphery division of the world, with a minority living in developed welfare societies and a majority in poverty at the periphery of the world economy. In this global context the Church's 'third way' implied a position in favour of the decolonization movements, upholding the importance of 'development', but recognizing its problematic dichotomy with the other side of the coin 'underdevelopment'.

During this period, the doctrinal message of Pope Pius XII (1939–58) was of great influence behind the action of important popular movements and policies. One of these was regional integration. There was a parallel here between Latin America and Western Europe, which was leading the way through the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957. In the European case, Catholic political leaders, such as Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer or Jean Monnet, played a central role in the formulation and conformation of the integration process. Something similar took place in Latin America, where a new young generation was feverishly engaging on behalf of change. It had roots in the previous generation of the Cordoba movement and was influenced by ideas around 'development' and social inclusion. The United Nations (UN) was of great importance as a disseminator of these ideas, to which could be added the increasing echo of the decolonialization movement and the impact of the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

After the creation of the CPL, a new milestone in the institutionalization of 'Latin America' as an identity and geopolitical unit was the creation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (*Comisión Económica para América Latina* – CEPAL) in 1948. Under the leadership of the Argentinean economist Raúl Prebisch, CEPAL became a kind of regional think-tank with experts from the whole region. It pointed out reasons for underdevelopment and proposed solutions in the framework of a global analysis concerning inequalities between what it saw as core and periphery countries. Yet, besides the rational and modern approach of its social scientists, CEPAL was something more. It was, as far as the author knows, the first



intergovernmental organization with the name 'Latin America' in its title, the second entity to do so after the CPL. However, this time it was under the umbrella of another organization with 'universal' scope: the UN. With its headquarters in Santiago de Chile, CEPAL was an initiative of diplomats and what John Toye and Richard Toye called 'defiant bureaucrats' (Rivarola Puntigliano & Appelqvist, 2011). They were defiant towards the hegemony of the two super powers concerning the need for social goals. Furthermore, in the case of Latin America, they insisted that the convergence of all this advocated the need for regional integration.

A pivotal force behind CEPAL and this convergence was the Latin American national-popular governments, in power throughout mid-20th century. This paper refers to Mexico during the Presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), Getulio Vargas (1930–45 and 1951–54) in Brazil, or Juan Domingo Perón (1946–55) in Argentina. Perón became a leading representative of Latin (and South American) 'continentalism' and industrialization, upholding of Christianity and the popular masses (*el pueblo*) as the core of his 'Justicialist' social project. Besides integration, he was also one of the most important political leaders promoting a 'third way' between Communism and capitalism, a line of action that was close to that promoted by the Church (Vázquez & Peterson, 2016, p. 376). Even though the relation between Perón and the Catholic Church ended in conflict, the Church's Latin American geopolitical project was strengthened by the *Justicialist* support and promotion of many of its strategic ideas. Continentalism was one of them.

The Church was connected directly or indirectly to new political and social forces emerging during this period. It is surely not a coincidence that only one year before the creation of CEPAL, in 1947, the first regional meeting of Latin American Christian Democratic parties took place in Montevideo (Devés Valdés, 2000, p. 242). Not because there was a direct linkage between this two moments, but because the process of creating CEPAL was successful due to strong political support. The Christian Democratic movements were part of this. Beyond the support of expert groups, the Church was concerned with the popular dimension (*el pueblo*), surely inspired by the postulates of Pius XII and new ideas associated with the *populous Christianus*. Along this line, the linkage to labour organizations, as well as the Latin American dimension, was expanded. One example was the first Congress of Christian Unions (*Congreso Latinoamericano de Sindicalistas Cristianos*) in 1954, with increasing political involvement by Christian democratic political parties. One of the most emblematic was the Chilean Christian Democratic Party, which came into government during the presidency of Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964–70). Even before that, Chile was an avant-garde country in relation to Latin American regional integration, for example, in the creation of the Latin American Free Trade Association (ALALC) in 1961 and the Andean Pact in 1969.

Altogether, this link between the Church and these political forces was the heyday of what could be referred as the 'geopolitics of integration' in Latin America, that is, a geopolitical outlook that aimed to link integration and development thinking with the consolidation of an optimal geographic space for the establishment of a sovereign (autonomous) nation (Rivarola Puntigliano, 2011, p. 3). The national-popular governments represented new forms of political movements trying to combine the 'popular' and 'national' dimensions, within projects of development aiming to foster industrialization (Germani, 1962, p. 42). While political forces and the *técnicos* (experts) were influenced by the Church's pledge concerning '*pueblo*' social inclusion, continentalism and *Patria Grande*, the Church was in turn influenced by Cepalian ideas of developmentalism and core-periphery.

There were several driving forces beyond the Church and CEPAL with respect to sources of ideas concerning integration and Latin American identity. During this ebullition of Latinamericanism, the Church took much of what was in the air into its internal process of ideas and forms of reaching the popular masses. At the same time, it continued the internal consolidation of its own organization along pastoral goals. Even if the Latin American Concilium held in Rome in 1899 sought to have periodic meetings of the dioceses of each nation, this idea had not

flourished. New initiatives appeared in the mid-20th century, such as the creation of national episcopal conferences. The first was Brazilian and was held in 1952 under the leadership of Archbishop Dom Helder Camara (1909–99). Soon after, the conference was taken to a regional level, with the First General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Rio de Janeiro in 1955 (Methol Ferré, 1987, pp. 27–28). This was the basis for the creation of a permanent entity, the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), established in Bogotá. Its goal was to coordinate the Church's work across the region and assess national episcopal conferences. There was also the aim of gathering and creating identity among Latin American bishops, as a way of strengthening the 'continental' platforms as steppingstones of the Church's global line of action.

Local and global strategies were linked. The consolidation of this Latin American regional unit most probably went hand in hand with the path towards de-Europeanizing the Church by giving increasing influence and voice to the peripheral regions. Due to its history and a strong increase in population (mostly Catholics), Latin America gained an outstanding position in the new global outlook of the Church. The later Latin American Episcopal Conferences in Medellín (Colombia, 1968), Puebla (México, 1979), Santo Domingo (República Dominicana, 1992) and Aparecida (Brazil, 2007) confirmed this direction. Again, by linking global and local dimensions, the actions of the Church should not be seen as separate from the spread of new 'Third World' ideas as expressed in the Bandung Conference in Indonesia (1955), which was followed by the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964. Anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and development were three central themes by which the Church positioned itself. This path was clearly marked by Pope John XXIII's initiatives for global ecumenism, with participation in the debate over the Global North–South income divide and by taking a stand against global poverty.

There was, however, a strong setback for this line of action in Latin America. During the 1960s and 1970s, most of the national–popular governments were ousted by military coups, with a negative impact on social policies and regional integration. The 'third way' was strongly challenged and harassed by neo-liberal positions, as articulated through the repressive National Security Doctrine, as well as by Marxist-inspired theological positions such as the Theology of Liberation. Yet, the long-term line of action was maintained, and there was a return to the geopolitics of integration by the late 20th century into the early 21st century.

## A 'CONTINENTAL PUEBLO' WITH GLOBAL SCOPE

Along with the episcopal conferences and the process of change promoted by the Vatican during the second half of the 20th century, the Latin American Catholic Church had been creating its own perspective on the region and the world. This implied the emergence of a geopolitical perspective that involved the Church's internal organization as well as strategic visions from which to influence society and policy-making. The 'continentalist' approach was a central part of this. In this process, the so-called Juan Diego de Guadalupe group was an important source of thinking and promotion of ideas. A leading member of the group was Jorge Bergoglio, who became provincial superior of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1973 and Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998. Bergoglio had a strong attachment to intellectuals as a lecturer at the Faculty of Theology of San Miguel and Rector of the Colegio Máximo. He also had strong bonds to the Universidad del Salvador (USAL). Some influential people around Bergoglio were the Argentines Lucio Gera, Amelia Podetti and the current head of the Vatican's Commission for Latin America, the Uruguayan Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour. This group, also called 'Bergoglio's intellectual family', had regular meetings in the run-up to the Puebla Episcopal Conference (Ivereigh, 2014, pp. 106, 185). One of the most relevant collaborators was another member of this 'family', namely Alberto Methol Ferré, a Uruguayan thinker who was a part of CELAM's Pastoral Theological Reflection

group and an advisor to the General Secretary and Secretary at the Lay Department (*Departamento de Laicos*).

Continentalism was developed as a geopolitical idea and as part of a long-term process of uniting what has been called the ‘fragmented’ or ‘unfinished Latin American nation’. Initial steps for this were taken during the late 19th century with the imagination of a Latin American territorial dimension. It was, however, with CELAM that the first continent-wide collegial structure of the Church appeared, enabling ‘Latin-American Catholicism both to express its distinctiveness and to decide on its own pastoral policies’ (Ivereigh, 2014, p. 235). Bergoglio’s ‘intellectual family’ contributed to the formulation of a continentalist outlook, finding a particular role for Latin America within a global vision of the Catholic Church.

One can follow the evolution of the continentalist outlook by following the documents that resulted from each of the episcopal conferences. At the first Rio conference (CELAM, 1955), it appeared but was not yet formulated in terms of continentalist goals; there was as yet no clear orientation concerning regional integration or the ‘continental’ scope. The Rio document refers more to an ‘American’ rather than ‘Latin American’ continental dimension. In the period between the Medellín and Puebla documents, this advanced radically. In the Medellín document, there was a chapter concerned with ‘continental organizations’ and a call of ‘unity in action’ in order to overcome neo-colonialism and to attain liberation in (Latin American) cultural, socio-political and economic terms (CELAM, 1968, p. 5). In the Puebla document, it was mentioned in the introduction by Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) that the episcopal conferences and individual churches should make plans with a continental scope in harmony with CELAM (1979, p. 1). Continentalism was pervasive along the whole text, related to the Church’s territorial organization, its pastoral mission and concerning policy directives regarding regional integration. This can be seen in phrases such as:

in unity and variety, there are elements of continental value that deserve to be appreciated and deepened much more than merely national interests. It is important to remind our Latin American countries of the urgent need to conserve and increase the heritage of continental peace. (CELAM, 1979, p. 26)

The message to states was also directed towards the promotion of liberty, human rights and an autonomous and equitable development ‘able to take a position of active cooperation with continental integration and the international community’ (p. 92).

While there was one reference to the ‘great Latin American fatherland’ (*gran patria latinoamericana*) in the Puebla document, it was in the Santo Domingo document where the *Patria Grande* was definitely inserted. According to this, there was no other region with so many elements of unity as Latin America, with Catholic tradition as a pillar. As in the previous documents, the appeal to social justice and economic development was maintained, but increasing attention was paid to regional integration. It was now clearly formulated as a ‘Pastoral line’ aimed to promote and accompany efforts in favour of Latin American integration as a *Patria Grande*, from a perspective of solidarity that requires, in addition, a new international order (p. 76). By the time of the V General Conference at Aparecida in Brazil in 2007, the geopolitical evolution towards Latin American continentalism had become clearly elaborated.

Besides numerous pastoral reflections in the light of faith and the current social context, the Aparecida document presents a renewed emphasis with respect to the Church’s geopolitical ‘continental’ framework of action. It contains, for example, a direct reference to foreign policy related issues, with a particular emphasis on what is perceived as ‘significant and promising advances’ in the process of Latin American integration, with improvements in trade, political relations, closer communication and solidarity between Brazil and the Spanish-speaking and Caribbean countries. Yet the document also had critical observations, pointing out hurdles that bogged down processes of integration. It also raised a caveat of trade integration as weak and ambiguous when it was:

reduced to a matter for political and economic elites, and does not sink roots in the life and participation of peoples. Setbacks in integration tend to aggravate poverty and inequality, whereas drug trafficking networks are more integrated beyond any border. Even though political language goes on a great length about integration, the dialectic of counterposition seems to prevail over the drive of solidarity and friendship. Unity is not built by standing in opposition to common enemies, but by achieving a common identity. (CELAM, 2007, p. 124)

This was a far-sighted view and an early warning for pro-integrationist forces at a moment when regional integration was having one of its best moments. At that moment, there was a strong alliance of pro-integration oriented governments with ambitious designs. These were described as a 'pink tide', due to its leftist attachment, but if one looks at the political representatives (in different degrees and not without conflicts) it could also be regarded as a 'Catholic tide'. Many of the most relevant leaders, such as the Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa (2007–17), the Brazilian Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–11), the Venezuelan Hugo Chávez (2002–13), the Nicaraguan Daniel Ortega (2007–present) and the Bolivian Evo Morales (2006–present), were Catholic. They invoked Christianity in their rhetoric and used Christian symbols, something that was a change compared with many of the Latin American pro-Marxist left-wing leaders of the 1960s and 1970s. Some have seen this political wave as a 'populist revival', but there was also a kind of return to earlier 'national-popular' ideas and methods of reaching the people. As Germani (1962, p. 42) pointed out, this was shaped by (1) specific features of 'modernization' in under-developed economies; (2) the mobilization (and demands) of popular masses (*el pueblo*); and (3) the need to find feelings (*sentimientos*) 'of national identification that could play an integrative role by assuring cohesion of emerging social groups'.

In different ways, the Church has been involved in this movement, opening the door to the masses and giving a new meaning to 'national identification'. In searching for a new tuning regarding its position between *pueblo* and state, the Church participated in the promotion of social policies, a national vision of the *Patria Grande*, anti-imperialism and the critique of the negative effects of neo-liberalism. However, the Church is not hegemonic and is also prey to manipulation by other actors, as, for example, Hugo Chávez's appropriation of Christian themes (Løland, 2016, p. 136), similar to Perón in the 1950s. This created tensions, contradictions and splits within the national-popular movement of the mid-20th century as well as during the 2000s. An important difference between the 2000s and earlier moments concerning the role of the Church relates to a new global context. By this time, the Cold War had ended and Latin America was involved in the new challenges of globalization, which the Aparecida document saw as:

a complex phenomenon with various dimensions (economic, political, cultural, communicational, etc). ... Unfortunately, the most widespread and successful face of globalization is its economic dimension, which becomes paramount and conditions the other dimensions of human life. ... In its current form, globalization is incapable of interpreting and reacting in response to objective values that transcend the market and that constitute what is most important in human life: truth, justice, love, and most especially, the dignity and rights of all, even those not included in the market. (CELAM, 2007, p. 16)

There is no doubt here about the Latin American Church's position towards neo-liberalism and the negative aspects of 'globalization' as related to praising profit and competition and to increasing the concentration of power and wealth into the hands of a few. The continental approach was regarded as a way out of this, with a call to promote a different globalization, characterized by solidarity, justice and respect for human rights: 'making Latin America and the Caribbean not only the continent of hope but the continent of love ...' (pp. 16–17). The *Patria Grande* is now pictured as a 'continent of love', solidarity and 'hope' against the negative sides of globalization.

As in prior documents, the Latin American process was not divorced from the Vatican. In the wake of Aparecida, Pope Benedict XVI (2005–13) reinforced this path by setting all ecclesiastical communities in a state of ‘permanent mission’ called the ‘Continental Mission’ (CELAM, 2019). Along this line, a primary concern of CELAM was to aid the bishops in working together on pastoral activities, concerning the evangelization of the continent. One way of doing this was to promote a brotherhood among ‘bishops of the continent and a theological reflection and a common pastoral language that fosters communion and exchange between the churches’ (CELAM, 2007, p. 119).

Since the Santo Domingo document, the lines of action were also placed in a new global setting. In the post-Cold War world, the vision of the ‘third way’ had been substituted by one of ‘Latin American’ continentalism. This was part of a global vision of a multipolar world of continentally integrated states (or confederations) with a spiritual side that linked them to the masses (governmentalization). In the case of Latin America, that is clearly outlined in Aparecida:

The dignity of recognizing ourselves as a family of Latin American and Caribbean peoples involves a singular experience of closeness, fellowship, and solidarity. We are not merely a continent, simply a geographical fact with an unintelligible mosaic of contents. Nor are we a totality of peoples and ethnic groups in juxtaposition. One and plural, Latin America is the common house, the great homeland of brothers and sisters ‘of peoples,’ whom, as His Holiness John Paul II said in Santo Domingo ‘*the same geography, Christian faith, language and culture have joined together definitively in the course of history*’. It is a unity that is very far from being reduced to uniformity, but rather it is enriched with many local, national and cultural diversities. (p. 123)

One sees here how the ‘religeopolitical’ position of the Church touches on the dimensions mentioned before: political control, administration and governmentalization. When thinking about the Church’s long-term engagement in Latin America, it is clear that there is a geopolitical perspective that consolidated a regional (‘continental’) dimension along a global. Alberto Methol Ferré was a leading thinker behind this part, while Lucio Gera played a key role in formulating the ‘popular theology’, bringing pastoral governmentality and geopolitics into the same framework. At the core of the popular theology was the shaping of a ‘people–nation’ that springs from a common culture and historical past that create the bases for a joint will for unity, self-determination and a common good of political solidarity (Scannone, 2015, p. 249). These are some of the main ideas promoted by the first non-European pope, elected in 2013: a Latin American, the Argentinean Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Francis I.

## AN ARGENTINEAN POPE AND THE RISE OF THE PERIPHERY

Bergoglio’s ascendance to the Papacy could be regarded as a synthesis of the religeopolitical evolution of the Church’s thinking and action, at least from a Latin American perspective. It has certainly not been a linear path, particularly in the case of the Jesuits. After being the backbone of the Pan-Iberian universalization project and the colonization of ‘New’ and ‘Old’ worlds, the Society of Jesus was suppressed by the Portuguese Empire in 1759 and the Spanish in 1767. The society was later restored by Pope Pius VII (1800–23) in 1814 and returned to America in the midst of the period of independence. As explained by Ivereigh (2014), in relation to the imperial states, Bergoglio upheld the society’s respect of the diversity of cultures, refusing to act as the religious justification of European expansion. In his view, the society was, from its foundation, universalist ‘and for that reason opposed to the homogenizing internationalisms which, either by ‘reason’ or by force, deny peoples their right to be themselves’ (p. 864).

Besides this rejection of Eurocentric visions, Bergoglio also ‘drank in the core tenets of the Church’s social teaching’ that influenced the Church’s process of change during the 20th century



(p. 31). This explains the transition between the episcopal conferences of Medellín and Puebla, which implied the rise of an Argentine school of theology, from which the popular theology (*teología popular*) emerged. Rejecting neo-liberalism and Marxist-influenced theological views, it pointed out the need for a closer alignment to social issues and transforming the *pueblo* into a subject of history, a historic and cultural category in a project of liberation, which in their view implied 'redemption' (Metalli & Methol Ferré 2006, pp. 151–155). Most important, with respect to the concerns of my study, is the relation of this view to a global project with a geopolitical dimension, attached to the 'continentalist' idea of Latin America and (a Catholic-linked) *Patria Grande*.

According to Metalli and Methol Ferré (2006), the Latin American Church was a catalyst in the view of a common Latin American destiny in the frame of the *Patria Grande*, as well as in shaping the formation of a new global scope of the Church. Following the Brazilian theologian Henrique Cláudio De Lima Vaz, Methol Ferré saw a distinction between a 'reflex' and 'source' Church, where the first is determined by the latter. According to him, during the 16th century, Spain and Italy had 'source Churches', which shifted to French and German dominance by mid-20th century at the second Vatican Council (1962–65). Yet, in the later path of transition towards a global non-Eurocentric Church, Methol Ferré saw the Latin American Church as becoming a 'source Church' (Metalli & Methol Ferré 2006, p. 53) that would no longer be a follower of European doctrines but create its own geopolitical visions and strategies. This went hand in hand with the end of Cold War bipolarity and the making of a new world order where countries such as China, India and Russia were pushing towards a new multipolar order. As it has done for centuries, with the ascendancy of Bergoglio to the top of the Vatican structure, the Church was adapting to a new global context.

Continentalism was regarded as a geopolitical roadmap to steer in the making of a new world system. The aim was not to isolate regions but to search for a public supranational authority to protect the 'common good', as formulated in John XXIII's (1963, p. 14) Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*, or in a more recent report from the *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace* (2011). In the case of the latter, it is argued that the gradual and balanced transfer of a part of each nation's powers should be directed towards world and regional authorities. In the case of Latin America, the regional level took the form of a 'continentalist' geopolitical vision, as a steppingstone towards the construction of a universal state. A particularity in this case was that there was a peripheral outlook where 'continentalism' was to overcome subordination and underdevelopment. Some pundits and politicians go as far as to advocate the creation of a Latin American (or South American) state, a 'continental *pueblo*' or a 'continental nationalism' (e.g., Herrera, 1964, p. 169). As recently argued by Carriquiry Lecour (2017), integration is a necessity and an inescapable and urgent priority to acquire weight in the international system with the ability to impose respect. It is, in his view, the only possibility for consolidating a spiritual independence that is in relation with the Catholic tradition, 'rooted in their peoples and cultures and, at the same time, open to universality' (pp. 104, 124). Along this line, the creation of the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) in 1991 was regarded as the central node for the creation of a South American continental state on the path towards a Latin American state (Methol Ferré, 2013).

## CONCLUSIONS

As this paper shows, the Catholic Church has a geopolitical project for Latin America, and it has been influential in the promotion and shaping of Latin American regional integration initiatives. It could be said that the Latin American Catholic Church, along with the intellectuals associated with it, (1) have influenced and promoted the creation of geopolitical visions for Latin America and beyond; (2) had a pervasive influence on cultural movements shaping national ideologies and identities, the *Patria Grande* being one of them; (3) been a driving force for regional



integration; and (4) been a promoter of political parties and social movements, inspiring social and economic ideas linked to development and economic solidarity.

Many of the ideas and concepts linked to a Latin American national and geopolitical dimension were not created by the Church. They are the product of convergences and synergies from analytical dimensions derived from different kinds of actors and areas of thinking. There is, however, no doubt that the Church has been a driving force in the formulation of a 'continental' geopolitical identity and in outlining objectives. In what is referred to as the Church's internal organization, the Vatican has generally determined the global framework and taken decisive steps such as the establishment of the CPL. When the Latin American dimension became increasingly consolidated, it finally was transformed into a 'source church'. It not only elaborated its own religeopolitical view for Latin America, but inserted it in the formation of a global one.

In the case of Latin America, 'religeopolitics' became closely attached to regional integration. Along this line, we find many of the dimensions of political control and administration in visions of territorial administration. In the case of the Church's internal organization, this entails more than vision, of which CELAM is proof. In relation to the promotion of regional integration, there have been initiatives and new structures, but Latin or South America are far from the imagined continental state. Yet, the power of imagination should not be underestimated since it is linked to identities. As CELAM documents show, the religeopolitical objectives were linked to pastoral goals and activity, where continentalism and *Patria Grande* became increasingly central issues. Thus, when an organization of the dimension of the Catholic Church points in this direction, regional integration, as a cultural and political force, might show considerable resilience and popular attachment.

So far, the Church has benefitted from its significant influence in all Latin American countries and by having local, regional and global geopolitical dimensions of thinking and action. According to estimates, together with the military, the Church is probably still the entity with the greatest confidence among the population of the region (*Latinobarómetro*, 2018). However, the high confidence is not only related to the Catholic Church but to Christian churches in general. In fact, non-religious 'groups' and 'other Churches' (especially evangelicals) are increasingly gaining Catholic souls. It thus has become more difficult to equalize 'Latin American people' and the values of a *Patria Grande* with Catholicism. The Catholic Church's regional approach is increasingly confronted with other 'religeopolitical' views. Even if large groups still might be attracted to a 'Latin' *Patria Grande*, there are important shifts in terms of values and identities. For certain, the Catholic Church will maintain popular attachment, and there is much legitimacy in its pledge for economic solidarity, family, social justice and encompassing national visions. A challenge has risen, again, in how to adapt a geopolitical '*casa común*' ('common home'; Franciscus, 2015) in an increasingly fragmented and globalized Latin American society and economy.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## ORCID

Andrés Rivarola Puntigliano  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2312-2441>

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